Frank Gruber's up to the minute Miracle

Weird Tales

JULY

15¢

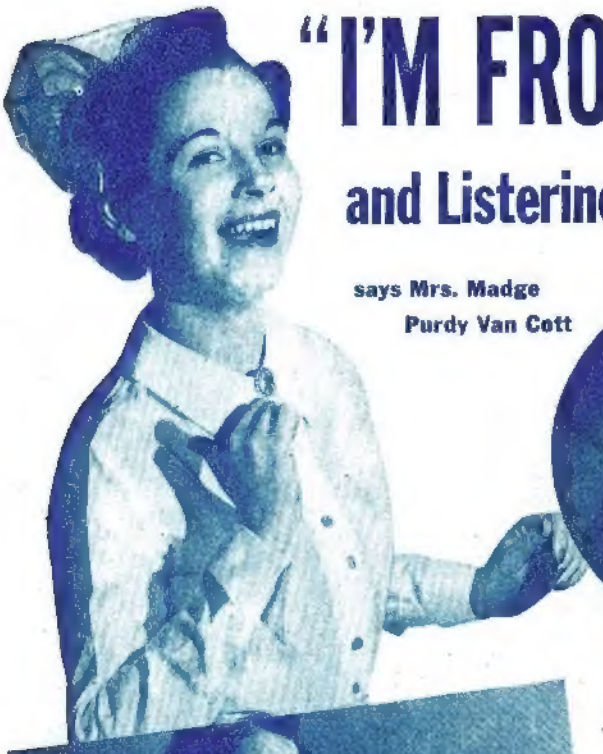
An adventure of a PROFESSIONAL CORPSE
—whose livelihood is "dying"
by H. BEDFORD-JONES

The Gentle Werewolf by SEABURY QUINN

"I'M FROM MISSOURI—

and Listerine certainly showed me!"

says Mrs. Madge Purdy Van Cott



When I became a nurse I first heard of the peculiar bottle-shaped bacillus, Pityrosporum Ovale—nearly always found in high concentration in infectious dandruff conditions—and how important it is to keep this and other organisms under control. Time and again I prescribed Listerine Antiseptic and massage . . . time and again I saw dandruff's scales disappear.

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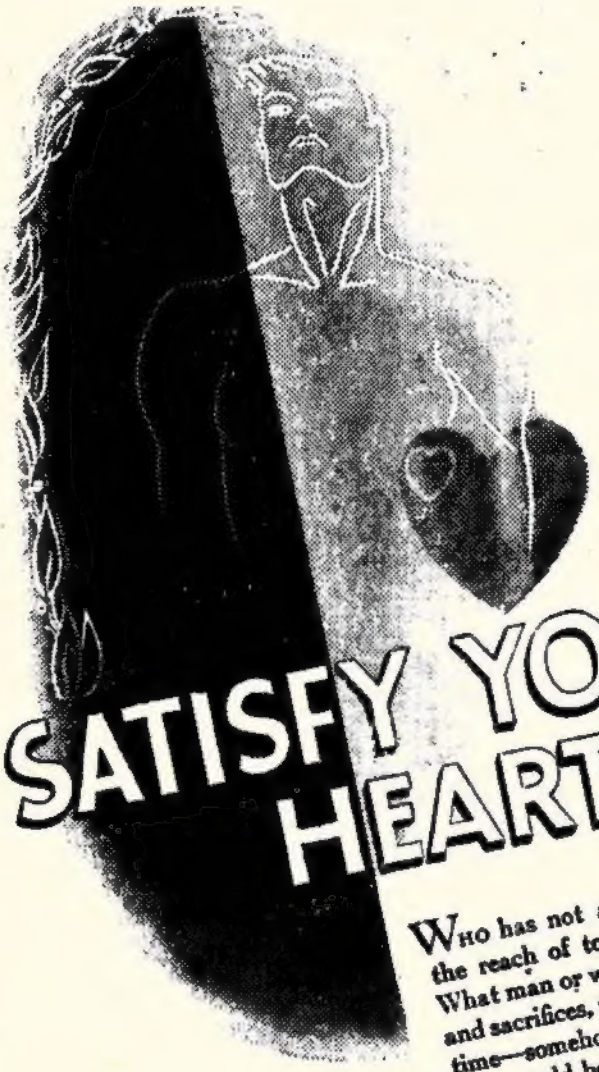

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WEIRD TALES

JULY

1940

Cover by
Margaret Brundage

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Except for personal experiences the contents of this magazine is fiction. Any use of the name of any living person or reference to actual events is purely coincidental.

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34x4½	3.65	1.85
35x4½	3.75	1.85
32x5	4.25	2.25
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An Adventure of a Professional Corpse

The Artificial Honeymoon

By H. BEDFORD-JONES

The secret of one of the strangest professions in the world.

FOR twelve years I've earned an honest living in a strange, perhaps a horrible fashion. Nobody in the world has ever before followed my profession.

James F. Bronson is the name. I've played a chief part in the most dramatic situations, the most pitiful and heart-rending situations, which the human brain could conceive; and in each case I've been quite oblivious to all that went on. For, during these twelve years, I've been a professional corpse—a walking dead man.

You may possibly have noticed the advertisement I've run in newspapers from time to time, all over the country. You may have wondered what it meant. It was quite discreetly worded. From the very beginning I've tried to guard against any connection with crooked enterprise. As appears in the instance of the Shuteye Medium. I didn't always succeed; and elsewhere I may have been imposed upon; but to the best of my knowledge I've never been employed toward the harm of anyone, or in contravention of the law.

Here's a sample of my advertisement:

> **Personal!—It is possible to simulate death, as I can demonstrate to interested parties. Endorsement of medical profession, absolute discretion. All work confidential but must be legal and subject to closest investigation. News Box B543.**
>
> **3439**

Had I been unscrupulous, I could have amassed a fortune through this blind ad. Each time it appeared, I've received tempting offers, some frankly illegal and others with some illegal aspect in the background. I've never accepted one of these offers.

In relating a few of my most remarkable experiences, I must protect my own identity and that of my clients; otherwise, no details will be changed or hidden. For example, in the story of the blind farmer and the strip dancer, the lady concerned is now an internationally known movie star. It would be a dastardly act even to hint at her identity. Nor do I want to do myself out of a job. Despite the thirty-one times I have been pronounced dead, and the seven times I've actually been buried, I am still in pursuit of shoes for the baby.

Before taking up my first case, the curious account of the artificial honeymoon, let me briefly sketch my history and the discovery of my singular ability.

I was born on a farm in western Canada, and had a fair education, with two years of college, before my father died and the family went broke. After drifting around and never noticing anything extraordinary about myself, I came back to the farm at the age of twenty-three, to support the women folks. I was broke. We were all broke.

"I came upon the gourd bottle and did what only a young fool would do: I sampled it."

I had an uncle who was also a drifter. He had been in South America, and turned up one fine day with a trunk full of junk, a lot of wild stories, and a cough that killed him two months later.

He had brought from Ecuador two tiny, shrunken human heads, the size of a billiard ball. He sent these off to a museum and the money helped to bury him. Among other things he had a bottle made from a gourd and filled with liquid, which he said was a sacred drink used by the Indians in Ecuador to produce dreams. He expected to make money out of it, but died before he could get anywhere with his schemes.

After his death I was going through his effects, hoping to find something that we might sell, for we had bitter need of money.

I came on the gourd bottle and did what only a young fool would do: I sampled it. Pouring out some of the stuff I tasted it. As it seemed harmless and I was curious to see what dreams it would produce, I swallowed the whole dose.

It burned like fire. I became rapidly drowsy, and frightfully scared. I stumbled downstairs, told the folks what I had done, yelled that I was poisoned, and then keeled over, dead to the world.

It seemed that I really was dead. Naturally skinny and none too strong, I must have looked terrible. They said that my lips were really blue.

The doctor came the six miles from town in record time. He took one look at me, put his stethoscope to my chest, felt for my pulse, and said I was dead. He stuck a pin in me, and was sure of it. He hauled open my shirt and ran his fingernail over my abdomen, and there was no reflex. Then he turned up my eyelid, held a mirror to my nose, and changed his mind at once.

"Hello! Something queer about this; he's breathing. And his pupil's not dilated," he exclaimed. "Where's that stuff he took? Where did it come from? What is it?"

NOBODY had the answers, of course. Neither did he, but he was a shrewd man. He gave me a very careful examination, and presently slid an injection into me. It was, as he told me later, a fortieth grain of atropine and caffeine sodium benzoate. This brought me around. Had it not been for the eye-pupil and the mirror test, he would have buried me.

My only sensation was of having been asleep, and I had no ill effects. Some days later he told me in plain words what a damned young fool I was, and what was amiss with me.

"Ever been examined for life insurance?"

"Never could afford luxuries, doc," I admitted.

"Hm! A queer case, Bronson; I'd better make it clear to you. First, you have bradycardia and auricular fibrilation; in plain English, a slow heart, beating barely forty to the minute, but it flutters instead of beating. Barrel chest; the heart is back from the ribs and the stethoscope doesn't get it. Naturally not," he added grimly, "because your heart is on the *right* side."

This was before it had become fashionable to have the heart thus misplaced.

As he explained, the slow heart and fluttering circulation killed any pulse, and accounted for my usual pallor and my bluish lips. Also, the liquid I had taken was enough to kill anyone; a little more might have actually killed me.

"I took a sample of that stuff and had it analyzed. Here's what is in the infernal concoction," and he handed me the report of the analysis. "The protopine, of course, killed the sensory nerves; there was no abdominal reflex. You had me fooled for a minute. Luckily I gave you the right hypodermic to bring you around. Don't be such a fool again. The minute you get home throw that cursed liquid of yours away."

I did nothing of the sort. Why not? Simply because, at the time, I thought I might capitalize the local notoriety this experience was bringing me. I thought of writing a story about it, and I might need the liquid as proof. So I kept it. Here is the analysis he gave me:

Anhalonium (Peyotl)	10%
Protopine	8%
Bhang	15%
Alcohol (Tequila)	67%
Inorganic salts, minute.	
Coloring matter, type undetermined.	

The local newspaper told about the young farmer who had been dead and was alive, with his heart in the wrong place. Other newspapers copied the story. A Scotch surgeon came out from Edmonton to investigate me. He thumped me, measured me, examined me minutely, and after grudgingly confirming the opinion of the local doctor, went away. (Not long ago I met him again in Los Angeles, but he failed to recognize me.) Obviously, the theory was entirely correct, for since then it has served in all my contacts with the medical fraternity.

This misadventure caused me great ter-

ror; the discovery of my peculiar physical formation preyed upon me and frightened me. And yet, as a direct result of my local notoriety, I received the first lucrative inkling that I need not consider myself doomed to an untimely end. Two men in a car with a United States license showed up at the farm a few days later on, and asked for me.

THE driver was a husky, vigorous man with shrewd gimlet eyes. His left hand was gloved and dead; it was an artificial limb, but he could work its mechanical fingers very cleverly. His name was Earl Carter, and he was an attorney from the States. The man with him was a physician whom he had brought out from Edmonton.

Well aware that the family would not approve his errand, Carter got me to go out for a ride with them. Once we were out of sight from the house he drew up alongside the road. The two of them pumped me, and I was ready enough to talk about my experience. Presently Carter looked at the doctor, who nodded.

"I'd chance it, yes."

"All right." Carter handed me a crisp hundred-dollar bill. "Bronson, this is yours if you'll get that gourd bottle, take a dose, and show us you can play dead. The doctor here will take care of you and bring you around. If you can do the trick I'll pay you a thousand more and all expenses. I want you to go home with me and pull off the stunt once again, under certain conditions. I'll need you for perhaps a month. It's good pay."

"What?" I exclaimed, in swift alarm. "Take a chance on killing myself for a hundred dollars?"

"Are you worth that much alive?" Carter asked grimly. "Think it over, young man."

He made no other argument, to his credit, and none was needed. The thought of the money overbalanced my fears; at the moment, we actually had no food in the house. I made him sign an agreement to take care of all funeral expenses if I really died, however.

Then we drove back home. I sneaked out the gourd bottle, and we went to town. In a hotel room I took a dose of the stuff—and went to sleep. First, the doctor had gone over me very carefully. He was taking no chances.

When I woke up again the hundred was mine. Carter admitted, too, that he had been frightened stiff by the result of the experiment. The doctor was more enthusiastic about it. I heard them talking.

"The eyes could be taken care of," the medico was saying. "The only thing he responds to is the mirror test, otherwise. That is, if you exclude a very critical examination."

Carter grunted. "Yeah? What would take care of the eyes, then?"

"Homatropine would dilate the pupils as in death, and a little cocaine with it would obviate any corneal reflex. Except for the breathing, he was to all appearance a dead man. He could stand no fluoroscopic examination, naturally; but he'd fool many medical practitioners, especially if no laboratory facilities were at hand. A most remarkable case!"

Carter knew now that I could do what he wanted. I knew that the stunt produced no very bad effects on me, so my terror was gone.

In a very general way only, Earl Carter told me what he desired. He gave me five hundred dollars advance pay, which I turned over to the family, and we started in his car for the States.

This drive marked the great turning point in my life.

Carter would not detail his plans, but whatever they might be, I could guess that they held nothing petty or unlawful. This man was no piker. He carried a spacious air. His vast energy, his driving

power, were phenomenal, and extended in a dozen different directions. He could turn his hand, even his mechanical hand, to anything, and become a master. His air of entire assurance was no mere braggadocio. It held something overwhelming. We became real friends on that trip, and Carter talked to me like a father.

"With this damnable gift of yours, Bronson, you'll have to keep a tight checkrein on yourself. If you fell into the wrong hands, if you became a tool for unscrupulous crooks, you could make a raft of money; watch out! God knows I'm no angel, and I don't believe in much of anything, but this is something that frightens me."

"You should worry," I said with youthful cynicism.

He gave me a hard look. "You don't get it. Bronson, whatever powers there may be in heaven or hell keep an eye on such things. Of this I'm convinced. I can't explain it; you're a farmer, but you can't explain how a blade of corn comes up out of a seed kernel. Still, you know it does. There's a strange and terrible certainty in the law of compensation, young man. If you should turn yourself to illegal uses, look out! I don't know what would happen, but I'd hate to be in your shoes. You can make money, and make it straight. Remember that, always."

Over and over the lawyer harped on this theme, and drove it heavily into me. He was a fine man, the squarest man I had ever known, even if he was full of legal tricks. Square in a man's sense of the word. Angular, hard, straight as a die—foursquare.

He admitted freely that he did not serve the law, but made it serve him, and at times ran pretty close to the wind. He handed out none of the old blarney about legal ethics, which is something designed merely to help rook the sucker. On that drive he gave me a liberal education in the cold, ugly, hard-rock racket of lawyers; and more, he showed me how definitely a man must live by his own code of ethics if he is to come out on top.

If Earl Carter is still alive and reads this story I want him to realize how deeply his words sank into me, and what fruit they bore. I owe that man a great deal.

Before reaching the city that was our destination, we had a week's drive. In this time I came to learn a lot about Carter's business. He was not a mouthpiece for crooks, as he had little or no criminal practice, and wanted none. He did specialize in helping people who were in a jam—and who could pay heavily for the help.

He drilled into me that the prime business of a lawyer is to get his client's money, and that plenty of big-time legal lights with wealthy clients simply made use of the law to serve the wishes of those clients. This was only a tiny corner of the racket, but Earl Carter had turned it into a mighty big corner, for himself. No matter how respected or innocent a person might be, the law could trap him and squeeze him—unless he happened to have an attorney who could outsmart the law.

"And I'm the outsmarter, you bet," Carter told me quite frankly. We drew pretty close together in those days. "I get the sucker off the hook, and he pays through the nose for it. Thirty per cent of all business in America is run on the principle that the fool and his money might as well be parted now. We've passed the age of simple honesty; it went out with muttonchop whiskers. Only, I get his money by saving him from his folly."

"Where do I come in?" was my question.

He grinned at me. "You just obey orders. Right now, I've got a whopping big case on hand that should never come into court. That's why I took a long trip by myself; I need to cool off my brain and get ideas. When I found you, I got 'em.

From the angle of legal ethics and such bunk, I ought to be shot for what I've got in mind. There's just one thing about it to remember. It's going to get an innocent person clear of a lousy mess. And if you ask me, that's pretty damned good ethics all by itself."

Before crossing the border, we stopped a couple of days in a small town. How Carter managed it, I can only surmise. When we left there, however, I had a legalized birth certificate in the name of Arthur Sullivan. As such, I came into the United States with him, and I continued to be Arthur Sullivan for some little time thereafter.

At a suburban station a few miles outside his home city, Carter let me out.

"Ride into town and go to the Grand Hotel," he said. "Get yourself some clothes and study the stock market; you're a broker from San Francisco and you never heard of me. Let your mustache grow. You'll hear from me in a week."

I obeyed orders. The Grand Hotel deserved its name; I spent money, but did not pad my swindle sheet. The mustache made a great change in my appearance, and I hung around board rooms and learned the jargon of the market, for I was anxious to make good at this job. Meantime, I heard a lot about the Petty case.

It was the biggest, juciest and hottest scandal that had ever struck town, and when it came to trial promised to be still hotter.

Colonel Petty had died three years before, leaving a sister, a widow and a daughter. He was many times a millionaire, owning about a third of everything in the city, and his estate all went to his daughter, under the guardianship of his widow, who had plenty in her own right. And now the sister, who was one of these thin-lipped women, had chipped in to demand the guardianship, the money and the daughter, alleging that the widow was an improper person to have the child, and so forth. And they had the goods on her, too.

Around the hotel I had met a doctor named Slausson, who knew everybody in town, and I half suspected that Carter had steered him on me. We got pretty well acquainted.

"But what's the scrap about?" I asked Slausson, as we talked over the Petty case. "I understand this daughter is eighteen. Whoever wins would only get to handle the estate for three years or less. And can't she pick her own guardian?"

"Not in this state." Slausson grinned. "Minors are protected in this state, you bet! But you don't get the idea. Nobody gives a damn about the girl; it's the shakedown. This old maid sister, Tabitha Petty, has the biggest law firm in the West handling her charges. And those boys are slick. Mrs. Petty, the widow, is a frivolous, pleasant, harmless woman who likes a good time and spends her money. When they get her into court, they'll just tear her wide open, see? Misconduct, you bet, real or faked. Probably faked, if you ask me. It'll be red hot, too. She faces newspaper notoriety of the worst kind. She's sure to lose the girl, who adores her, and she'll be branded for life—unless she digs into her wad and settles things. Earl Carter won't let her get into court. He'll settle."

I remembered all Carter had said, and from what else I could gather, realized that Mrs. Petty was the sucker in the case. The trial was set over to September, which was three months away. The sucker was sure to lose. Tabitha and her law firm were utterly respectable, aristocratic, and practically saints; so upright they nearly fell over backward. Most lawyers, up against that firm, just hollered for help and paid up rather than risk themselves in court. But not Earl Carter.

"Like to meet Mrs. Petty?" Slausson said to me one afternoon. "She's giving a din-

ner dance tonight at the country club. We might run out there. I'd be glad to give you a guest card, too, for the length of your stay."

NATURALLY I assented, perceiving the hand of Earl Carter at work. This became quite certain with evening. Mrs. Petty not only was most gracious, but invited me to luncheon two days later. Little as I knew of society, this intimate invitation could only be explained in one way —Carter.

Mrs. Petty was pretty and light and useless as a bubble, with not enough brains to be anything but the leader of town society; just the right target for such a lawsuit. Her daughter Patricia—ah, that was different! The girl was something wonderful. There was a flame in her. She volunteered to teach me golf, and in another three days we were running around together like old friends.

I did not flatter myself that she had any personal interest in Arthur Sullivan. It was a hard job not to lose my head, what with her companionship and being invited to the house all the time by her mother, mingling with their friends and so forth. I was pretty much of a farm hand, and had sense enough to realize it, fortunately.

All this time, I had received not a word from Earl Carter, and had not seen him. I sent in my expense account each week to his office and received an envelope of cash, even to pocket money, by messenger, in return.

Then, one morning, Slausson telephoned me to come over to his office. I went. His girl attendant sent me into his private office, and he gave me a grin.

"Strip, Sullivan," he said. "I want to give you the once-over."

"What for?" I demanded, in surprise.

He cocked his head on one side and eyed me.

"Yours not to reason why, feller. Yours but to do and die. Do you get me? No names mentioned, either. I want to check up on you, that's all."

I assented with a shrug. When he applied his stethoscope to my right side instead of to my left, I knew instantly that he was working for Earl Carter; not another soul knew my secret. Evidently he was checking me over to be sure there were no mistakes, and he was thorough about it. When he got through, he gave me a bottle of liquid and a dropper.

"Complete directions on the bottle," he said. "Whenever you feel like committing suicide, Sullivan, be sure and use this hematropine and cocaine first on your eyes. Follow the directions carefully; a drop every minute for five minutes—"

Still no word from Carter, no hint of what I was to do. The suspense began to get on my nerves. So did Patricia.

Why? Well, I must be honest about it; no one could be so intimately associated with that girl, and not react to it. We got on pretty well together. She was very frank and open, a good sport in all the term implies, and pretty as a picture. She had hair like red gold, and looked like Myrna Loy in the face; when she laughed, you could hear little silver bells tinkling in the air.

She was not in love with anyone, as I had discovered. We had not mentioned Carter, nor anything out of the way in our friendship.

I knew that she was devoted to her mother and hated her Aunt Tabitha like poison, as well she might, but we had never discussed the lawsuit, of course.

Then, without warning, everything broke at once. And what a break!

It was the middle of July, and hot weather. I did a round of golf with Patricia in the morning, and came back home for lunch with her and Mrs. Petty. There was one other guest; it was Earl Carter. I was introduced to him, quite formally, and

then we had lunch served out in the sunken garden behind the huge house. It was cool there, beneath a big striped awning. Also, no one could overhear what was said.

When the things were cleared away and the servants dismissed, Pat and her mother went to look at the flowers, leaving me alone with Carter. He gave me a hard, straight look.

"Sullivan, this is Tuesday. On Friday afternoon, you ask Pat to marry you."

It hit me like a bombshell. I stared at him for a moment, then got angry.

"Are you joking? No, you're not. Well, I'll do no such thing—"

"Part of the job," he cut in, chewing on a cigar. "Come on, now; straight talk. You and I and Slausson know you're going to die. These women don't. They think you're going to marry Pat, then the marriage will be annulled. You know all about the legal mess, and you've got to do the one thing that can save Mrs. Petty from the whole dirty net these swine have caught 'em in. The marriage, of course, is to be in name only."

"Why not hire somebody else for that?" I said hotly. "And then have the marriage annulled?"

"Nope. Under the state law, the one thing that can clinch our business is for Pat to become a widow—quick. Otherwise, there'd be fraud charges and hell to pay. Pat comes into her money, is free of guardianship, this damned cat of a Tabitha is helpless and so are her lawyers. And there's no shakedown. Get it?"

I grunted in dismay. "But I'll be married, tied up all my life!"

Carter chuckled. "Sure, Arthur Sullivan will. He'll be dead and buried, with a fine monument in the cemetery. You won't. You'll be James Bronson, another man."

"Damn it, I don't like it, "I said bluntly. "What about Pat? Wouldn't she actually be tied up to me for life, if the truth of it ever leaked out? Isn't a marriage under a pseudonym still a marriage?"

"How can it be if the husband's dead?" Carter snapped. He reddened a bit; my question had hit him in a tender place. "Never mind all that; I'm running this business, not you. Here they come. Remember, now—it's to be annulled! That's all they know."

We rose, as the ladies returned. Carter explained that he had put the whole thing before me and I had agreed. It would all be very simple. Mrs. Petty would be able to have the marriage annulled and there would be no trouble.

"Oh, it all seems so terrible!" Mrs. Petty's nerves were shaky. "What if anything went wrong?"

Carter gave me a grim look. "Nothing will go wrong. There's not a loophole."

"But there is." Patricia flashed me a quick smile. "If Arthur were crooked, things might go frightfully wrong; but he's not. Your opinion of him, Mr. Carter, is correct, and I know him pretty well. You will help us, Arthur?"

"I suppose so, yes," I said, hesitant. "Only—"

"Only, it's a business proposition," said Pat, with a nod. "Right."

"Well, I suppose I'll have to go through with it," her mother declared resignedly.

"You will," Carter assured her. "And when you're tempted to back out, just think how Aunt Tabitha is going to foam at the mouth! Now, you young folks, get things straight. You propose on Friday afternoon, Sullivan. Pat says yes. The two of you leave for a drive in Pat's car on Saturday morning. Drive on across the state line to Cedarville; you can get a license and be married there on Saturday afternoon, which you can't do in this state. Thus there can be no court interference until Monday, when it's too late. Cedarville is a big place. Take a suite at the Hotel Cedar and stay until Monday. Then

drive on clear to St. Louis, and come back here the end of the week. All set?"

It was all set. Before leaving, however, Carter had a last word with me alone.

"Sullivan, you'll pull the death act on the following Monday, at a luncheon here. I'll have just the people I want, for guests, and I'll be here as well. That evening, I'll get you out of town. Go far and stay. Shave off your mustache or grow a beard, either one. I'll give you a ring here—you and Pat will come back to this house—on Sunday evening and make sure everything's jake."

So everything was shaped up, and once I was in for the business, I could admire the ingenuity of Carter's plan.

Just the same, I was frightfully awkward when with Patricia, during the next two days. A thousand problems bothered me. I did not know what to say or do. At length she got right down to cases with me, while we were dancing at the country club Thursday evening.

"Arthur, for heavens' sake come back to earth and be sensible! Stop flushing every time you look at me. I'm the one who ought to be embarrassed and all in a stew."

"That's the trouble," I said. "You're not. And—and I think a lot of you."

Her face got cold. "You're not jumping the gun, are you?"

"No, confound it," I said. Just then someone cut in, and we did not refer to it again.

Friday afternoon, at the country club, we played around five holes and I could not get up to the point of proposing. Business or not, I evaded it. At the sixth hole, Pat told me to get a move on. I had gone into a bunker, and the caddies were watching.

"Just what we want, Art," she said briskly. "When they see us kiss, those boys will spread the news, and—"

"All right, damn it, will you marry me?" I blurted out desperately.

She laughed. "Yes! In spite of all the world, my hero!"

So I kissed her, and she kissed me; then she drew back, a little red.

"You don't need to show too much enthusiasm," she snapped. "Remember, this is business only. Come on, finish the match and pretend you don't see those caddies snickering."

So I did.

Next morning I met Pat downtown, climbed into her car, and we were off. She said her mother was pretty near hysterical over the affair, but would come out of it all right. Pat was nervous herself, and so was I. Even in a business proposition, people have feelings.

We got to Cedarville, crossed the state line, and at the courthouse got our marriage license. This part of it was all right. We hunted up a justice of the peace and that was all right, too, until he went to work on us. Then I began to feel uneasy. When he slammed his book and pronounced us man and wife, Pat was white and shaky and I was red as a beet.

"Well, get busy and kiss the bride!" cackled the justice.

I did it, and Pat clung to me for a moment. Her kiss was sweet, and it was like fire; it went through every vein of me.

"Two dollars," said the justice. "Business is business, folks."

"A good motto to remember," Pat said to me, and I nodded dumbly.

We went to the hotel and got a suite. Pat went up with the bags, to freshen up a bit, and I got rid of the car. She met me in the lobby, and we went out to a picture show, which is the best sedative for disordered nerves. It was going to be an awkward moment when we got back to the hotel for the night, and I think we both wanted to put it off as long as possible.

However, the movie put us into humor for joking over the marriage state, and we

hunted up a good place where we could dine and dance.

"What about wine?" said Pat, after we had ordered. She gave me her bright and flashing smile; there was a sparkle in her eyes. "Don't you ever celebrate your weddings with champagne, Art?"

I thought of her kiss, that afternoon, and knew perfectly well that we were on dangerous ground; I certainly was, and I more than suspected she was. All right, be damned to caution, I thought with a burst of feeling. After all, this is my wife. We are legally married. Champagne, and a big one!

So we dined and danced. Pat loved to dance, and with her flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, she looked divine. When I held her close to me and brushed my lips against her face, she looked up at me and laughed.

"There's something bewitching about it all, isn't there?" she breathed. "About being alone, in a perfectly strange city, and —and—"

"And being old married folks," I said. "Yes, there is. Did you write your mother?"

She nodded. "This afternoon. And I lied beautifully so she could show the letter. I said we were married, and how happy we were, and how fine you are—"

"Was it all a lie, Pat?"

Her eyes met mine, and her arm tightened about my shoulders.

"Maybe not all, Art," she murmured, just as the dance ended and the crowd streamed back to the tables.

IT WAS late, when our taxi dropped us at the hotel. I got the room key and we went up; and to be quite honest about it, I had quite forgotten that motto the justice of the peace had quoted to us. Pat was a glorious creature, and I knew that she did like me, and she was my wife. That was enough to make anyone forget anything else.

We had a suite of two rooms with bath between. I unlocked one door and we went in, and switched on the lights. The room was empty.

"I had all the bags put in my room," said Pat, leading the way. "Come along and pick yours out. It's been a perfectly scrumptious time, Art; I've never enjoyed champagne so much in my life!"

And now it was ended. She did not say the words, but I could sense them—and I could sense the regret in them.

We went on through to her room. I picked up my bags, and then set them down again. A lump came into my throat when I looked at her, when I met her eyes.

"Pat!" I stammered. "Pat, dear—"

She dropped her cloak on the bed, rumpled up her short hair, and turned to me with a half smile.

"Yes? Not a compliment, surely?"

"You're the loveliest thing I've ever seen," I said awkwardly, and reached out and touched her. Her eyes were radiant, as she came to me.

"Just for that, my dear, you might kiss me good-night," she said.

I held her for a moment, until she pushed me away, but not completely.

"The proper thing, Art, for an old married couple to do, would be to smoke a good-night cigarette together," she said gaily. "Take your bags over, then—"

What I read in her eyes made my heart pound. I kissed her once more, quickly.

"Right," I said.

Picking up my bags, I carried them over into my own room. And when I got there, I stopped dead. Sitting in a chair, calmly regarding me, was a perfectly strange man in a chauffeur's whipcord uniform.

"Who are you?" I snapped. "What the devil are you doing in my room?"

"Jim Brady, of the Gallup Detective Agency, Mr. Sullivan. My job is to drive

your car from here on, and to spend every night sleeping right with you."

For an instant I was speechless. Then I burst out hotly. He cut me short.

"Listen, Mister, it's no use talking. I'm here, and my partner's got the room across the hall with the transom open. We stick closer'n burrs until you folks get back home. And if you kick up any fuss, you get slugged and thrown into jail."

Pat, who had heard the voices, came in and stood staring. I was in a blether of rage. I thought Carter must have done this, but I was wrong. Brady was frank.

"Nope. I'm hired by Mrs. Petty, see? Now, folks, I'm mighty sorry to stop the fun, but that's my orders. You got to decide whether you want to raise hell or take it easy. I'll accommodate you either way."

I looked at Pat, and she had gone dead cold.

"Nothing to be said about it, I suppose," she observed. "It would knock everything in the head, Art, if we tried to fight—"

That was true, and I settled into a miserable resignation, and cursed Mrs. Petty with all my heart. We were married, yes, but we were up against two thugs—and publicity would upset the applecart.

And, believe it or not, that man Brady was with me closer than a burr, as he had put it, until we got back home the end of the week.

By that time, the budding dream was gone. My relations with Pat had settled down to a cool business basis. When we were esconced in her own gorgeous home, I put in a devilish two days—congratulations on all sides, happiness to the newlyweds, gifts and so forth. And it was all a lie, had people but known it.

I gathered that Aunt Tabitha was gritting her teeth and preparing for action.

On Sunday night Carter telephoned me on the last details. Monday noon came, and with it a formal luncheon. The old family doctor was there, among others. I complained of feeling ill, left the party long enough to put the hematropine in my eyes and take a dose of the liquid from the gourd bottle, and rejoined the company. I did not care particularly whether I stayed dead or not. The whole business had rather sickened me; I had not yet become used to such things.

At the luncheon table, I went to sleep. The old family doctor took one look at my eye, felt my pulse, tried for my heart—and the fat was in the fire. Doctor Slausson was hurriedly summoned, but no use. I was dead and no mistake.

Nor did I make a pretty corpse, with my pallor, bluish lips and so forth. Carter told me as much that night, after he had revived me and taken me out of town in his car.

"You looked like the devil," he said. "Good thing I was warned about the mirror test! Watch out for it in future, if you spring this stunt again. Luckily, Slausson took care of it; held a mirror to your lips and pronounced it blank."

He handed me my money and turned me loose with his blessing.

"Feel all right? Good. Clear out, and don't you ever came back to this town!"

"But how'll you manage the funeral?" I demanded curiously.

"Never mind. That's all fixed, and no last views of the corpse either." He grinned at me and started up his engine. "Arthur Sullivan is dead, understand?"

It really is a beautiful tomb. I went through the city last year and stopped over just to see it. A lovely shaft of granite raised to the memory of Arthur Sullivan. And I found it had been erected by Pat's "second husband."

I've often wondered what sort of a yarn she told him about her first honeymoon!

Thieves came in the night, and stole the Golden Chalice.

Golden Chalice

By FRANK GRUBER

Two thieves had stolen the Golden Cup. And it was old—very old. And some said . . .

THE cup was made of gold, no question about that. It was about four inches tall and weighed pretty close to a pound. I didn't know of any other metal that would have made the cup weigh as much, even though the thing didn't look like gold. But I guess that was because it was so old.

It looked like it had been buried in the ground for a long time and was pretty battered and dented. It wasn't a big haul. We'd be lucky to get three hundred for it

from Opdyke. He'd make maybe two hundred profit on it, by melting it down and selling it to the government as old gold, at thirty-five dollars an ounce.

We'd turned in pretty late the night before and it was almost noon before we got up. I dug the cup out from under the bed and was looking it over and thinking that I was a damn fool for taking such chances for a lousy hundred and fifty—my share of the split.

Benny, on the other hand, was pretty chipper. He wasn't used to big money and all he'd done to earn his share was keep a lookout outside the place, while I went in and did the dirty work.

"Not bad, Jim," he cackled. "It couldda been more, but this ain't bad at all."

I looked around the room I was sharing with Benny. It was about eight feet by ten and contained a bed with springs that sagged almost to the floor, two chairs, a cheap dresser and a row of nails in the wall that served as a clothes closet. Benny paid four dollars a week for the room. The one I'd had up the river—with bars on the door and window—had been just as cheerful.

I said to Benny: "We'll get some clothes and some good food and have a couple of parties. We'll be broke in a week. Then what?"

"Then we'll crack another safe," he replied promptly. "There're some swell joints on Long Island and . . ."

THAT was when the knock came on the door. I never saw a man change his color as quickly as Benny did. One minute he'd been cocky as a Jungle Shawl fighting rooster, the next his face looked like sour dough and he was shivering like a man who's just been pulled out of the river.

I took a couple of quick steps toward Benny. "Thought you said no one knew where you lived?" I hissed at him.

Benny's teeth chattered as he shook his head. "They—they don't! That's why . . . you s'pose it's—the cops?"

Well, it could be. But I didn't think so. We'd made a clean getaway the night before. I said to Benny: "Maybe it's your landlady?"

The knock on the door was repeated, two quick knocks, then three spaced further apart. I jerked my head at the door and moved toward it.

Benny called out: "Who is it?"

A quiet sort of voice answered. A man's voice. "Open up, I want to talk to you."

Benny wasn't shivering, now; he was shaking like a young sapling in a Kansas twister. For my own part I took a quick look out of the window. I saw that it opened on a dead air shaft. There was no retreat that way, and I cursed Benny for being such a fool as to rent a room without a hole by which he could escape.

Well, there was nothing to do but open the door. I slipped back the bolt and jerked open the door. I expected a cop. Maybe he was a cop. But he didn't look like one.

He was tall, about six feet, well built, but still looked kind of lean. He was in his early thirties and rather dark complexioned.

I hardly took in his features though, because of his eyes. They were large and dark and there was an expression in them that I can't describe—except that when I looked into them I was . . . scared! I admit it and I don't scare easy.

He was smiling.

"May I come in?" It wasn't the tone a cop usually uses.

I moved back into the room and shot a quick look toward the bed. Benny had had sense enough to throw a blanket over the gold cup. But when I looked back at the stranger his eyes were on the bed. He'd closed the door behind him.

He said: "You'll have to take it back."

He *couldn't* see the gold cup; for that

matter he couldn't have known that Benny and me were the ones who stole it.

I began edging around him, so that he was partly between Benny and myself. I said: "What're you talking about? Take what back?"

He shook his head and smiled. "The golden chalice—I guess you'd call it a cup. You'll have to take it back to Alfred Halleck."

Benny chirped up, then. He said: "Sure," and went to the bed. He stooped over, put his hand under a pillow and came up with a .32 caliber automatic. I blinked. I hadn't known that Benny had a rod.

He pointed it at the stranger and snapped: "Up with 'em, Copper! You're not pinching us—not today!"

I was looking at the stranger. He didn't seem worried. He was still smiling, only . . . the smile was a kind of sad one. I had a funny feeling down around where my stomach's supposed to be.

"I'm sorry," the stranger said, "you'll have to take it back."

Benny sneered. "There's some rope in the top drawer, Jim. Tie his hands. My room rent's up today, anyway. We'll just leave him here."

I got the rope, but I wasn't feeling so good. The gun in Benny's hand—I've done a lot of things in my time; I've been up the river, but I never carried a gun. I didn't believe in guns. Sure, I'm a safecracker—a burglar. But I take my chances. I try not to get caught, but if I am—that's my hard luck. I take the rap. But I don't ever want any murder rap. All the fellows I ever knew who carried guns wound up with murder raps.

The stranger put his hands behind his back. I wound the rope around his wrists, then he stretched out on the bed and I finished up by tying his feet. I did a good job of it. I wanted enough time to take the cup to Opdyke, get my split and leave. I wanted no more of Benny.

Benny got the cup from under the blanket, wrapped it in a towel, then rolled the whole thing inside an old newspaper and tied a piece of string around it.

We were ready to leave the room when the stranger spoke again. He said: "Take it back. Take it back, Benny Potter and Jim Vedder."

I DIDN'T think about that until we were outside of Benny's rooming house. Then it struck me. *No one,* aside from Benny, knew my name. I'd only got out two days ago. I'd come straight to Benny's room and had been out of it only once, the night before when we took the trip up to Fox Meadow in Scarsdale and cracked the safe.

Benny lived on Christopher Street. We walked east to Sixth Avenue, then turned north. After a block or two, Benny said, "Let's stop in here and get a glass of beer."

I was willing. My throat was kind of dry. The saloon didn't look like much, but beer's beer no matter where you get it. We went in. It was the middle of the morning and the place was deserted except for the bartender and one customer who stood in front of the bar, with his back toward us.

"Two beers," Benny said, before we even got to the bar.

Then the man at the bar turned around. It was The Stranger. The man we'd left in Benny's room, tied hand and foot.

He looked right at me and this time he wasn't smiling. The temperature of the cafe seemed suddenly to get ten degrees colder and I know that the short hairs stood straight up on the back of my neck.

He said: "You'll have to take it back."

I was pretty shocked by the sight of him, but Benny looked like he was going to faint. His mouth was opening and closing like that of a fish taken out of the water.

I backed to the door and that broke the spell on Benny. He gave a hoarse yell,

whipped out the .32 automatic and rushed backwards, like a prize-fighter backing away. He was in such a hurry he missed the door and banged against the wall.

He made it the second time and I was only one jump behind him. Out on Sixth Avenue we rushed to the next corner, which was 11th Street, turned right and didn't stop until we were almost up to Fifth. We stopped then just because we were out of breath. We both looked back, but The Stranger wasn't in sight.

"Gawd!" panted Benny Potter. "How did he get loose from those ropes and beat us to that saloon?"

"He couldn't have done it," I told Benny. "We went there straight from your room, by the shortest way. And, anyway . . . how did he know we were going to turn into that very saloon? We didn't know it ourselves until we saw the sign."

Benny's eyes almost popped out of his head. "That's right!" he gasped. "He couldn't have known we'd go in there—unless he guessed!"

I didn't say a word. I was still feeling cold, despite the long run I'd just had and I don't think the short hairs on my hackle had gone down. Up the street a little ways was a delicatessen shop, with a newspaper stand in front of it. I plunked down two cents and picked up a morning newspaper.

It was on the front page, a picture with the caption: "Holy Grail Stolen." Below the head were three lines, reading: "Burglars last night blew the safe in the home of Alfred D. Halleck, noted archaeologist and took the famous golden chalice which has been the subject of much controversy since Halleck brought it to America three years ago. Page 3, for further details."

I turned to Page 3. The story went on:

"Burglars last night dynamited the safe of Alfred D. Halleck's Fox Meadow estate and stole the golden chalice that was the sensation of the New York World's Fair. Professor Halleck returned from Asia Minor three years ago with the golden cup that has since been called the Holy Grail. Professor Halleck claimed to have found the cup while excavating near Antioch. Scientists, religious leaders and archaeologists have become divided in two camps as to the authenticity of the cup. Professor Halleck's group claim the cup is undoubtedly of first century manufacture and from its description and the location where it was found believe it is the original chalice used by Christ and his disciples during the Last Supper. . . . "

There was more, but that was as far as I read. I couldn't see more of the print. All I could see was the face of The Stranger. Swarthy, tall, in his early thirties. . . . Once, when I was broke and it was snowing outside I spent an entire afternoon in the Public Library. I was looking through an encyclopedia and came across a number of pictures supposed to be of old religious paintings found in the Catacombs near Rome. One of the pictures was supposed to go back to the first century. It showed a tall, well-built man in his early thirties, a swarthy man, with a prominent nose and a beard.

THE STRANGER didn't have a beard . . . but I knew now why he looked familiar.

I gave the paper to Benny and let him read it. He snorted: "Imagine those suckers paying money to see this thing at the World's Fair. Well, Grover Whalen's going to be disappointed this season, because this cup won't be there. It'll be melted down and . . ."

"No," I said, "it won't be melted down. We're taking it back."

Benny stared at me. "Are you crazy? After the trouble we went to get it? Hey—snap out of it. Opdyke lives over here

on Fourth Avenue. He'll haggle around a little, but he'll come across with three hundred. Two-fifty at the least."

"The cup goes back to Fox Meadow," I told Benny. "It's—an antique. It's worth a lot more than three hundred."

"All the more reason then!" Benny cried. "We'll show this to Opdyke—kick the price up on him."

All of a sudden I got mad. I grabbed Benny's arm and twisted him around. "You fool, don't you see? Halleck values this cup. It's worth a lot to him—a lot more than three hundred. All right, we'll sell it back to him."

Benny's eyes lit up. "Say, that's an idea. Maybe he'll go a grand for it. It says here he thinks it's a religious piece. Well, if he thinks so much of it he ought to go a grand. He's got the dough. That place of his cost a lot. We'll hold him up for a grand. Come on—we'll grab a train out to Scarsdale and get it over with. We'll break in on him and make him come across with the dough, before we turn over the cup. Otherwise he might call the cops. . . ."

We took a bus on Fifth Avenue and rode up to Forty-second, then walked across to the Grand Central. Inside we bought two one-way tickets to Scarsdale and looked up the train schedule. One was listed to leave in twelve minutes. I didn't like the idea of waiting around the waiting room, so gave Benny the high-sign and headed for the washroom, on the lower level.

To kill time we got up on a couple of high seats to get our shoes shined. Benny got his shined first, then the bootblack got on mine. It was timing things pretty close. When he finished with me, it was two minutes to train time. I paid for the shines and headed for the door. It opened before I got to it and—The Stranger came in!

Benny let go altogether this time. He yelled to high heaven and he got so scared he dropped the cup that was wrapped in the towel and newspaper.

Me, I just stood and stared at The Stranger. I guess I'd still be standing there looking at him, if he hadn't stooped and picked up the package. He held it out to me, smiled and said:

"Take it back, Jim Vedder."

He left me holding it, turned and then walked out. Benny recovered then. "What—what do you make of that, Jim?" he cried.

I said: "We're taking it back, Benny. Come on!"

The gateman was just about to close the gate when we got to it. I grabbed a newspaper from a stand next to the door, threw down a nickel and scooted inside. We ran to catch the last car of the train, just as it was starting.

We got seats in the rear and I spread out the newspaper. It was the noon edition of an evening paper. The story was still on the front page. But there were some new angles to it. First of all, Alfred D. Halleck was offering a reward of $1,500 for the safe return of the Golden Chalice, as he called it. And *No Questions Asked.*

In an adjoining column was an interview of Halleck, made by one of the paper's reporters. Halleck was pretty worked up by the thing. He was offering a reward, he said, but he didn't really expect to get the Golden Chalice back. That was because he didn't think that ordinary burglars had blown his safe. He suspected the job had been done, or hired done, by a certain wealthy collector of *objets d'art,* who'd been bothering him for the last three years, trying to make Halleck sell the Golden Chalice. The collector, Halleck said, had offered him $50,000 for the cup and when he'd still refused to sell it, had threatened to steal it from him.

Halleck wouldn't tell the reporter the collector's name, but the reporter was a smart lad. He'd checked up back in the

office and had gone to ask a Mr. August Messerschmidt, who lived on Park Avenue in New York, if he had any comment to make. Mr. Messerschmidt was a well-known collector of *objets d'art*. The reporter didn't come right out and say that Messerschmidt was the man who'd made the offer and threat to Halleck, but any kid could figure out the answer. Anyway, Messerschmidt had thrown the reporter out on his ear.

Benny was reading over my shoulder. When I put down the paper he took it from me and ripped out the page. He began folding it up.

I said: "What're you going to do with that?"

He didn't answer right away. The conductor had come along, collected our tickets and put a couple of slips in the slot on the back of the seat ahead of us. When he had gone away, Benny said:

"This Messerschmidt's a crook. He wants that cup any way he can get it. I've heard of guys like him. There's a fella in Philadelphia, collects pictures. He's got a million dollars worth of them and no one ever sees them but himself, because half of them have been swiped. This Messerschmidt'll go twenty-five g's. We'll get off at the 125th Street Station."

I WONDERED why I'd ever tied up with Benny Potter. With what had happened to us in the last hour. . . . I said to him: "No, we're going to Scarsdale. The cup goes back to Halleck. We take whatever reward he gives us and we let it go at that."

"Are you crazy?" Benny yelped. "The most he'd give is fifteen hundred and the chances are four in five he won't give us anything but a houseful of cops. We're not going anywhere near Fox Meadow. We're getting off at the first stop and taking this to Park Avenue. That guy Messerschmidt's a bigger crook than we are. That's why he'll come across. . . . Gimme the cup!"

He reached for it and I shifted it to my left arm, against the window. With my right hand I slapped down his reaching paw.

He gave me a dirty look, then slumped down in his seat. He didn't say a word until the train pulled into the 125th Street Station. Then he suddenly got up. "All right, Jim, if that's the way you want it—"

His hand went to his hip and came back with the .32 automatic. I'd forgot all about him having it. There'd been too much on my mind.

I looked into his eyes and knew that he was going to take the cup from me if he had to shoot to get it. But I knew, too, that I wasn't going to give it to him.

I shook my head. "You can't, Benny. You . . ." I broke off and made a sudden dive for him. Even as I moved I knew I couldn't make it. Benny's finger was going to tighten on that automatic.

It thundered. But I didn't feel any shock or pain. I landed in the aisle on my hands and knees, twisted around and looked up at—The Stranger!

Benny was looking at him, too. And all of a sudden he yelled and headed for the door.

The train was already moving, the door was closed, but Benny tore it open. I climbed to my feet, started back for Benny and then I heard a yell that I'll hear to my dying day. It was Benny.

There was a lot of commotion, then. People yelled, the conductor pulled the cord and the train stopped and backed to the station.

Benny . . . Benny was dead.

The 125th Street Station is in the heart of Harlem, it's up in the air, like an elevated and the station platform is about three feet above the tracks. When Benny jumped the train was already beyond the platform. Benny had landed on the ties,

fell forward on to the next track . . . just as another train pulled in on that track.

I didn't wait around. There were a half dozen policemen around and questions were going to be asked—questions I didn't want to answer. I took a subway train back to the Grand Central, I bought another ticket for Scarsdale and took the first train.

In Scarsdale I took a taxi to Alfred Halleck's house in Fox Meadow. I went to the front door of the house.

I didn't ring the bell. I didn't have to, because the door opened before I got to it. It was opened by—The Stranger. I wasn't surprised. Not by then. In fact, I would have been surprised if the door had been opened by anyone *but* The Stranger.

He smiled at me, in a pleased sort of way and said: "I'm glad you brought it back. Will you come in, please?"

He led the way to a library, opened the door for me and said: "Mr. Halleck!"

Halleck sitting behind a teakwood desk, looked up at me, said: "Yes?"

I walked across the room and put the package on the desk in front of him. "I brought back the Golden Chalice."

His eyes popped wide open and he grabbed the package and tore the newspaper from about it. When he stripped off the towel and saw the cup, perspiration came to his forehead. He said: "Thank God!"

Then he looked at me. "Do you mind telling me . . . I know, I said no questions asked and this is not going to go any further . . . did you steal it, or are you returning this for someone?"

I told him. "I stole it. I'm sorry. You can call the police."

He looked at me in a funny sort of a way. "The police?" he repeated. "I'm not going to call them. I'm too glad to get this back. And here . . ." He opened a drawer and pulled out a thick stack of bills. "And here's the reward—fifteen hundred dollars."

I shook my head at him. "No, I don't want any reward. Not money. But you can do something. Tell me . . . who is the man who brought me into this room?"

He blinked. No one brought you into this room. You came in yourself."

"But there was a man with me. He—he opened the door and brought me to the room. He announced your name."

"You said my name," Halleck replied. "And you came in by yourself. There isn't another man in my house. Besides ourselves only the cook in the kitchen . . . a middle-aged woman."

I stole it and returned the Golden Chalice six months ago. Alfred Halleck gave me a job. I'm working for him, now. I'm a sort of handy-man around his place and I'm going with Mr. Halleck on his next trip to Asia. He knows all about me.

All except what I did, the day after I returned the Golden Chalice. I wanted to get some things off my mind and I took the train back to Grand Central. In the washroom on the lower level, I went up to the bootblack. Before I could say anything he grabbed up a couple of big brushes and backed away.

"Don't you bother me, Mister, I'll call the police!" he yelled.

I shook my head at him and put a dollar bill on one of the seats. Then I took three steps away from it. "That dollar's yours," I told him, "if you tell me exactly what you saw here yesterday when I had my shoes shined."

The bootblack looked at the dollar and then at me. He shook his head, mumbled in his throat, then said: "Well, sir, you and the gent'man with you had a couple drinks too many I guess. You started for the door, then all of a sudden you got to talking and yelling and then you bust out of the door like you'd seen a ghost."

I nodded. "You're sure there wasn't another man here at the time—a man who'd just come in the door?"

The bootblack took another step back. 'No, sir, there was only the two of you. And myself. That's all there was in here . . . no more."

I went out, took the Fifth Avenue bus and rode down to the Village, then walked to the cafe on Sixth Avenue where Benny and I had gone for a glass of beer and encountered The Stranger.

The bartender recognized me right away and reached for a bung-starter. "Get out of here!" he snarled at me. "I don't want no hop-heads in my place."

"I'm sorry," I said, "but would you mind telling me exactly what happened here yesterday?"

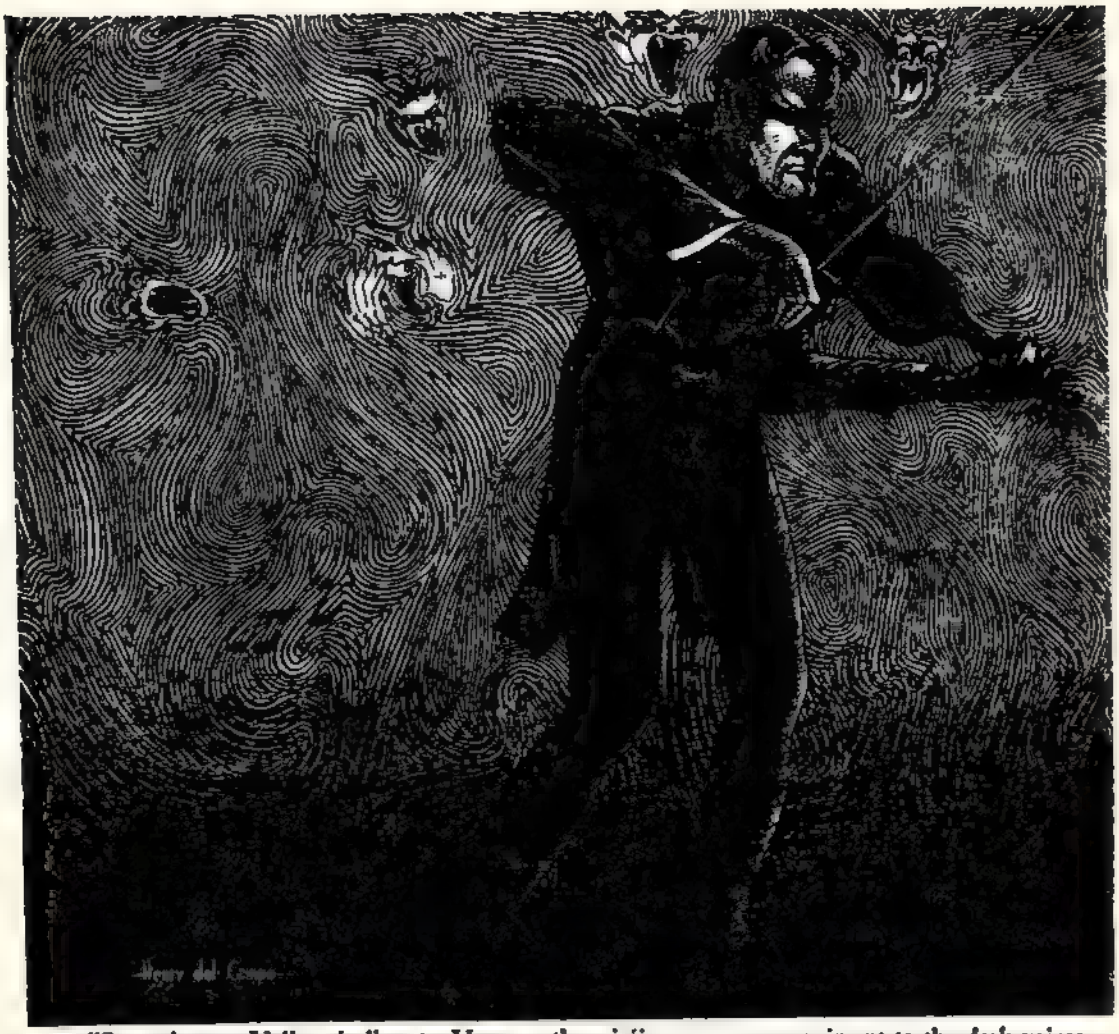
His eyes rolled, but he said, "I'll tell you. You and some other dope came in here, yelled for a drink, then started cutting up, pretending there was someone else here, that you were afraid of. That partner of yours had it particularly bad. . . ."

"I guess he did. But you're *sure* there wasn't anybody else in here at the time—a tall, dark complexioned man?"

"There wasn't no one else in here," the bartender said, grimly. "There hadn't been anyone in for a half hour until you dopes came along. . . ."

There was a lot of stuff in the papers for awhile about the Golden Chalice. Mr. Halleck gave it out, that it had been sent back to him, anonymously. The papers wouldn't believe that; they claimed it hadn't been stolen in the first place, that it was a publicity stunt on Halleck's part.

That started up another bunch who claimed that the Golden Chalice was a fake. All of them admitted that it was old and that Halleck might even have dug it up in Asia Minor, but the chances of it's being the Golden Chalice were about one in eighteen billion. They're still arguing about it. I don't say anything. Because I *know*.



"Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, the violin sang accompaniment to the dark voices in his brain."

The Fiddler's Fee

By ROBERT BLOCH

Genius for sale—at a price that could not be repaid in all Eternity.

THE door of the inn swung open and the Devil entered. He was as thin as a corpse, and whiter than the shroud a corpse lies in. His eyes were deep and dark as graves. His mouth was redder than the gate of Hell, his hair was blacker than the pits below. He dressed like a dandy, and he came from a fine coach, but it was assuredly he: Satan, Father of Lies.

The innkeeper cringed. He had no fancy to play host to this emissary from Darkness. The innkeeper trembled under Satan's smile, while his eyes searched

Satan's person for signs of a tail, of cloven hoofs. Then he noticed that Satan carried a violin-case.

It was not Satan, then! The innkeeper breathed a silent prayer of relief. It was only momentary. A minute later he was trembling with augmented fear. If this was not Satan, this man who looked like the Devil and carried a violin-case—then it must be——

"Signor Paganini!" whispered mine host.

The stranger inclined his dark head with a slow smile.

"Welcome," quavered the innkeeper, but there was no smile on his face. It was almost as though he preferred confirmation of his first fear rather than this. Satan one could deal with, perhaps—but the child of Satan?

Everyone knew that Paganini was the son of the Devil himself. He looked like the Devil, and many were the diabolical legends concerning his unholy life. He was said to drink, gamble, and love like the Prince of Darkness, and to entertain an equal hatred of all men. Certainly he played like Lucifer—in that case under his arm he carried an instrument of hellish power; a violin whose sublime singing drove all Europe mad.

Yes, even here in this tiny village men knew and feared the strange and terrible legend that had grown up about the destiny of the world's most famed violinist. New and fantastic stories were continually pouring in from Milan, from Florence, from Rome—and half the capitals of the Continent as well. "Paganini murdered his wife and sold her body to Satan." "Paganini has formed a Society against all God-loving men." "Paganini's mistresses are offered in the Black Mass." "Paganini's music is written by the very fiends of Hell." "Paganini is the son of the Devil."

Legends these might be, but the atrocious conduct attributed to the *maestro*, that was fact. His scandalous amours, his disgraceful attitude toward the great and the nobility had been confirmed time and time again. Gossip, slander, malice these things were in part. But one shining truth remained.

No one had ever played the violin like Nicolo Paganini.

Therefore the innkeeper bowed despite his fear. He sent a lad to change horses and serve the driver of the coach, ushered *Signor* to the best room, and awaited his presence in the parlor of the inn with a carefully prepared table.

Another awaited his presence as well—the inkeeper's son, also called Nicolo.

Young Nicolo knew even more about the great man than his father. The lad knew more about the violin than anyone in the village, with the exception of Carlo, the wine merchant's son. Both boys had studied at the local conservatory since early childhood, and there was keen rivalry between them; between their families, each of whom fostered the budding genius of their heirs.

Now Nicolo awaited his glimpse of the great man. What a triumph over Carlo! What a thing to talk about in weeks to come! Perhaps he, Nicolo, might even speak to the illustrious musician—might, if the saints were kind, receive a word in return. But that was almost too much to hope for. Paganini was not interested in boys. Still, Nicolo was determined to see him; he did not fear the legends. So the lad waited, working on the preparations for the meal in the kitchen with his sensitive ears attuned to the sound of footsteps on the stairs above.

They came.

PAGANINI sat in solitary splendor at the great table of the inn. No other customers were present to stare at the great man, and he seemed oddly content to be alone—he who loved applause, adulation, obeisance. His thin, hawk-like face

—singularly Satanic in the lamp-light it was—cast a black blurred shadow on the wall behind. His carefully curled hair rose in two horn-like projections against that shadow, so that the innkeeper noticed it as he entered, and nearly spilled the wine.

Paganini ate and drank sparingly—as fiends do. He said never a word, nor did he exhibit the humanity of smile or scowl. When he had finished, he sat back and seemed to stare into the candle-flame.

It was as though his eyes turned homeward to Hell.

The innkeeper left the room, crossing himself. This silent guest was indeed a son of Satan! In the passage he came upon Nicolo, staring at the pale violinist.

"No, no!—come away," the father whispered. "You must not."

But Nicolo, moving as one entranced, entered the parlor. A voice that was unlike any his father had heard came almost mechanically from his throat.

"Good evening, *Signor Paganini.*"

The eyes left the flame, after partaking of their glare. A long, deliberate glance pierced Nicolo's face like a dark lance.

"The whelp knows my name. Well!"

"I have heard much of you, *Signor.* Who in Italy does not know the name of Paganini?"

"And—fear it," said the violinist, gravely.

"I do not fear you," answered the boy, slowly. His eyes did not fall when the *maestro* smiled his wolfish smile.

"Yes?" The voice purred. "Yes; that is right. You do not fear me. I feel that. And—why?"

"Because I love Music."

"Because he loves Music," parroted Paganini, cruelly mimicking the intonations until the statement stood naked in its triteness. Then, slowly, as the stare came again: "But you do love Music, boy. I feel it—strange."

A hand reached out, a pale ghost of a hand with great sinews that hinted at delicate strength, however paradoxical that might seem. The hand gestured Nicolo to a seat. The hand poured wine into a glass. The hand drummed on the table slowly.

"Do you play?"

"Y-yes, *maestro.*"

"Play for me, then."

Nicolo raced to his room. The beloved violin rested against his heart as he ran back.

"It is such a poor thing, *maestro.* It does not sing——"

"Play."

Nicolo played. He never remembered what he played that night; he only knew that it came to him, and he played as he never had played before.

And the face of Satan smiled through the music.

Nicolo stopped. Paganini asked his name. He answered. Paganini asked of his teacher, his practice, his plans. Nicolo answered all questions. And then Paganini laughed. The innkeeper, listening in his turn in the passageway, shuddered when he heard that laugh.

It was a laugh that cracked through the earth and came up from Hell. It was the laugh of a sobbing violin played by a fallen angel in the Pit.

"Fools!" shouted the *maestro.*

Then he stared at Nicolo. Something inside the lad begged him to turn away. But as he had before, the boy returned the stare, until the master musician spoke.

"What can I say? Should I advise you to go to a good teacher, buy a better violin? Should I even give you money for that purpose? Yes, but to what end? You have the gift, but you will never use it."

Paganini sneered.

"You may be competent. You may even win small fame, a certain amount of success. But true greatness you cannot

achieve through teacher or instrument or training. You must be inspired—as I was."

Nicolo stood trembling, he knew not why. There was a horrible conviction in the words he heard. It frightened him, that hint of certain authority, of final knowledge.

"A man must compose his own work, play his own work," the voice went on. "And no human teacher can give you that gift."

Suddenly Paganini stood up.

"My pardon. I forgot. I came to this place because I have an—appointment nearby. I cannot keep my—the one I must see—waiting. I shall go now. But thank you for your playing."

Nicolo's face fell. He was convinced that in a moment or so more the *maestro* would have revealed something to him which he very much wanted to know. For Nicolo felt as Paganini did about his work. He knew that within him lay great talent; knew that any ordinary training would subdue that talent in channels of mere mechanical perfection. There was a bond between his humble self and the greatness of the master before him. And if only Paganini had spoken! Now it was too late!

The black cloak swirled as the violinist went to the door. Then in a rush of ebony Paganini swept back the garment as he turned.

"Wait."

He stared, and Nicolo felt his soul lifted and examined and torn and probed by the red-hot pincers of Paganini's eyes.

"Come with me. We shall keep our appointment together."

An almost audible gasp issued from the passageway at the end of the room. Nicolo knew it came from his father, listening. But he did not care. As the door swung against darkness, he moved to the musician's side. They left together.

"I will apprentice you this night to a true Master," Paganini whispered.

2

IT WAS a long walk up the mountainside to the Cave of Fools. The road was lonely in the midnight, but then it was always lonely, for men hereabouts feared the Cave. The Devil was said to dwell in its mists, and the Cave itself was unexplored by those who deemed its depths led down to Tartarus itself.

It was a long and lonely walk, and the way was strange amidst winding paths and twisting passages of rock; yet Paganini never faltered. He had walked this way before.

Now, the bony hand gripped Nicolo's brown fingers in an icy clasp so filled with cold, inhuman strength that the lad shuddered. But he followed through the steam and mist and fog that hid the clean light of the stars; followed to the mouth of the Cave as though impelled by the magic of Paganini's voice.

For the *maestro* spoke all that way, and spoke without reticence. Sensing a kindred soul, he revealed.

"They say I am a spawn of the Devil, and that is a lie. All my life they told me so—even my father, cursed fool! In the academies my fellow-students made the sign of the horns at me and the girls fled screaming.

"They screamed at me, who lived for Music and Beauty! But at first I did not care. I lived for my work, and I worked hard. Always I felt within me that spark, glowing to a flame.

"And then when I made my first appearances, I came again into the world of men. My music was acclaimed, but I was hated. 'Child of the Devil' they called me, because I was ugly, and my temper bad. I tried again to drown myself in work, but this time it no longer sufficed, because I knew my playing was not good enough. I had genius, but I could not express it.

"After a while one begins to reason.

My work was not enough. The world hated me. 'Child of the Devil?' Why not?

"I knew the way. I studied. I read the old forbidden books I found in the great libraries of Florence. And I came here. There is a legend of Faust, you know.

"There are ways of meeting Powers that grant things to men in return for an exchange."

They entered the Cave now, and when Nicolo's hands trembled at the words the musician's grip tightened.

"Do not fear, lad. It is worth the cost. Thirteen years ago tonight I was just such a lad as you; perhaps a bit older. I came this way alone, and with the same fears. And it was well.

"When I came forth I had within me the gift I craved. Since that time, you know, all the world knows, my story. Fame, wealth, beautiful women—all earthly success is mine to command. But more than that; greater than that, is my Music. I learned to compose, and to play. They say His songs moved the angels and the stars. I have that gift. And you, who know, love, and have born within you, Music—you shall this night partake of the same gift."

NICOLO wanted to run, to get out of this deep cavern where the steam swirled in fantastic shapes. He wanted to make the sign of the cross as he heard the bubbling and the booming from the depths ahead. And then a curious picture came to his mind—the vision of Carlo Zuttio, the wine-merchant's son. Carlo went to the conservatory, and he was a fool. But he had a better violin, and private lessons, so that he played more masterfully than Nicolo. And his parents were wealthy, and they boasted to Nicolo's father of their son and his music. The whole town knew that Carlo would go on to the big school in Milan. He, Nicolo, would not go on—he would remain and take over the inn, and sometime when he was old and fat he might play at country weddings for drinks. Carlo would be rich and famous, and wear silk when he returned to visit. Nicolo would no longer be a rival, then; merely a country innkeeper.

It was this vision, and no love of Music that came to Nicolo in the bowels of the earth. It was this vision that made him smile and follow Paganini as they advanced into the heart of the hot smoke and knelt upon the stones in the darkness.

Then Paganini called a Secret Name and the earth thundered. He made a sign not of the cross, and he prayed in a voice that was black and crawling.

Then the mists grew red and the thundering swelled, and Nicolo was formally introduced to his Teacher.

3

PAGANINI had been crafty. It was a bargain. Three years for him, and no more; where Paganini had gained thirteen. But the other ten years went to the *maestro* as payment for leading the way. It was a fair arrangement; a business arrangement.

That was what shocked Nicolo more than anything else when he returned home. It had all been so business-like. There was behind it a terrible hint of purpose; the Power knew what it was doing—there was no aimlessness, no blind evil. It was all so *arranged*.

Three years.

But there was singing in Nicolo's heart, singing which over-rode the sound of his father's quavering prayers, singing which rose to triumphant heights when he played at the conservatory the next afternoon.

"Paganini taught me," is all that Nicolo would say when the faculty exclaimed. "Paganini taught me," Nicolo told Carlo with a smile.

The singing rose higher as the weeks passed.

Nicolo, who read notes poorly, composed.

Nicolo improvised.

The faculty bought him a new violin, and on the festival day it was Nicolo who appeared as soloist with the orchestra from Venice; though Carlo was second in competition for the post.

Nicolo won the scholarship and went to Milan.

His father prayed but said nothing. Paganini did not write, but word came of his triumphs in France.

In Milan, Nicolo was a sensation at the school. Carlo came too, his parents paying his tuition; and Carlo was successful. He studied hard, worked diligently, played expertly.

But Nicolo's soaring tones were born of inspiration within. He was mastering a technique against which mere practise could not compete.

Through the year it was a constant competition between the two country boys—Nicolo and Carlo. The whole school knew it. Nicolo had the talent. Carlo had the ambition. The battle for perfection was deadly.

Nicolo was aging. His face was already maturing in set lines, and the color had left it set and harsh. It was whispered that his nights were spent in study that left him wasted.

The truth was that Nicolo's nights were spent in fear. He was remembering the tryst in the Cave of Fools, and he was anticipating the days to come. Only two years now—and so much to do!

He had been a fool. But Paganini's personality had overshadowed his own, dominated it. He had been led. He knew that now. Paganini had wanted a dupe, so that he might make such a bargain and extend his own life at the expense of another's. That is why he had taken Nicolo. Nicolo often wondered just what might have happened had Paganini gone alone to his accounting. He wondered, because in two years he must go—and there would be no dupe for him.

Two years! Nicolo would toss on his pillow and shudder at the thought. He could not hope to do what Paganini had done in thirteen. He could not win much but initial acclaim; none of the fame and the riches would be his in so short a time. But one thing he could do—beat his rival, Carlo.

Nicolo hated Carlo now. He hadn't used to hate him. They had been rivals, but friendly enough. Ever since that night in the Cave of Fools Nicolo had hated.

Carlo was keeping up. Nicolo found that his work came to him almost effortlessly. His hands moved without thought along the bow, and his fingering seemed undirected. There was no triumphant thrill for him in his music, no sense of mastery in his easy playing.

Carlo had this, because Carlo had to work and sweat to compete, and when he did so he felt satisfied. Moreover, aided by no supernatural gift, Carlo *was* competing too closely for comfort.

And the school liked Carlo. The teachers knew his work and praised him for it. They did not praise Nicolo because they could not understand his methods. He puzzled them.

The other pupils liked Carlo. He had money, and he was generous. He bought sweets for his friends, laughed with them at their parties. Nicolo had no money for sweets, no fine clothes for parties. The pupils were in awe of him, and they distrusted his face.

Carlo was handsome, too. The girls liked Carlo. Even Elissa liked him. And that added to the agony of Nicolo's nights.

4

ELISSA'S hair was yellow flame on a pillow. Elissa's eyes were the jewels on the breast of Passion. Elissa's mouth

was a red gateway to delight. Elissa's arms were——

It was no use. Nicolo couldn't think of anything more poetic. All he knew was that Elissa burned within him at all times. Her beauty was like a lash across his naked heart.

Actually, Elissa Robbia was a very pretty blond student, but Nicolo was in love and Youth knows only a goddess.

Elissa walked with Carlo, and she went to parties with him, and they danced at the festival together. Throughout the second year they were together always.

Always Nicolo watched from the corner. Once or twice he spoke to the object of his worship, but she did not seem to notice him, despite his efforts to be ingratiating. She preferred the handsome Carlo.

So Nicolo worked. He outplayed Carlo, though it was not easy now. Despite Nicolo's secret power, Carlo seemed inspired by love. Carlo followed his most difficult trills, mastered every detail of the well-nigh flawless technique which Nicolo mastered.

Still, Nicolo triumphed always in the end. The better teachers were now confounded by the spectacle of their two notable students. Often outsiders witnessed performances. The Opera sent conductors down to listen, and notables from all over the South attended the salons in local aristocratic homes when the star pupils played.

Nothing was said officially, but it was understood that one or the other of the boys would be groomed for concert debut within the year.

Both of them knew it, though they no longer spoke to each other. Both of them worked frantically. The final concert of the season would decide; they suspected that. Both had been asked for a performance of some solo composition.

Nicolo went to work a month in advance. What took place in his dark room will never be known, but he emerged with what he felt was a true masterpiece. He had worked as never before. He would win, he would shame Carlo before them all; shame him before Elissa.

He could hardly wait for the night.

The stage of the school was lighted and th. house was filled with those of a station to allow their jewels to reflect that light. Rumor had passed, and in the audience were musical notables from all Italy. And the Master was there, too—yes, the great Paganini himself! Come to watch Nicolo, his former pupil, they said.

What a triumph! Nicolo shivered with ecstasy, fondling his violin as he waited in the wings for the solos to end. Tonight he would appear before Paganini himself when he took victory over his rival. Nothing could make his happiness more complete!

Where was Carlo, by the way? He had not appeared in the wings as yet.

But—there he was—*in the audience! With Elissa.*

What did this mean?

A number ended. The director was announcing his name.

"Unfortunately the soloist who was to compete with Signor Nicolo this evening, Carlo Zuttio . . ."

What was that?

"Resigned from the school . . ."

Yes?

"Marriage to . . ."

Married! To Elissa!

He had done that, knowing he would lose tonight he'd given up music, retired to his father's business, and married Elissa. And now he had arranged for it to be announced, to rob Nicolo of his victory! Bitter despair rose in Nicolo's heart, and black anger.

But when his name was called he stepped forth and played.

He played his number, but it was not the original he had planned. For now he improvised; or rather, hate improvised for

him. Hate tore at the strings, plucked frenetically at a flayed violin.

And waves of horror crept through the house.

Through red mists, the black eyes of Paganini blazed, the smile dropped from Carlo's face, the lips of Elissa grew pale. Nicolo saw *her* eyes grow blank, and poured his music into them. She had never noticed him before, eh? Well, she would not forget him now—not this, and *this*.

Swooping to Hell, spiraling to Heaven, shrieking and whispering of damnation and glory, the violin sang accompaniment to dark voices that yammered in Nicolo's brain.

Nicolo had no arms, no fingers. He was all violin. His body was part of the instrument, his brain a part of the song. Both were being played by *Another*.

He finished.

Silence.

Then the thunder.

And while he bowed and smiled and the sound tore at his ear-drums, his eyes blazed into Elissa's empty face through the standing crowd.

Nicolo had won and lost tonight. But he would win again.

5

THEY came to him after the concert. They offered him money, for private study.

In a year, they said, he would come back and perform in a solo concert at the school.

Nicolo accepted the money gravely. It was supposed that he would use that money to spend his year in Rome, working under the great *maestri* as a private pupil.

But Nicolo had other plans. He knew that Carlo and Elissa would return to the village, and he meant to follow them there. He thanked the directors of the school and prepared to depart.

In the hallway stood a cloaked figure. It was Paganini.

Without a word the pale genius took Nicolo's hand, just as he had that night two years before. Together they walked the dark streets.

"You played well tonight, my son. They said your music was like Paganini's." He smiled. "And well it might be, since we study under the same Master."

Nicolo shuddered.

"Do not fear. In a year's time you shall have had all the fame and glory you desire. The world will bow before your power. That is as you desired, no?"

"No." Nicolo shook his head. "I shall not study and I shall not go to Rome. My desire lies elsewhere." He told Paganini of Carlo and Elissa. The *maestro* listened.

"So you return to the village, eh? Well, if it is that what you seek, I am sure you will be aided in your quest. Do not despair."

Nicolo sighed.

"I am afraid of that aid. This music—this playing—it is not a part of me. It comes from other sources, and I feel no satisfaction in stirring my listeners. Carlo and Elissa were stirred tonight; but it was the music that did it, not myself. Don't you understand?"

A cold whisper bit through the darkness as Paganini spoke.

"Yes, I understand, perfectly; but you do not. Tonight you played through hate, and there was hate in the hall. *But when you go to Elissa, you will play through love.* She will be stirred. For our Master is eminently successful in amours. Let your violin speak and she shall become yours."

"But what of him? What of Carlo?"

"Again, let your violin speak. It has a voice that drives men mad. *Let him hear that voice.*"

A slow laugh crawled out of Paganini's lips.

"I know how it will be. Ah, I know! Years ago I discovered that secret, and well

have I used it. Madden the cuckold and woo the mistress, and rejoice in the gift of the Teacher! I envy you your year, my friend. It will be a great triumph for you."

Nicolo's heart was pounding.

"You really believe I can do it?" he asked.

"Certainly. You were given the power; let it guide you to your purpose." Paganini's voice grew grave. "But it was not of that which I proposed to speak when I awaited you this evening. There is another thing.

"I want to remind you that a year from tonight you have an appointment in the Cave of Fools."

"I am afraid."

"It was a bargain, and you must go."

"What if I do not go?"

"That I cannot speak of. *He* will come for you then, I know it. *He* will revenge himself horribly."

"I wish," and Nicolo's voice was low with hatred, "I wish that I had never met you. You led me to this—tricked me into this infernal bargain! I was a fool, and I should kill you for it."

Paganini stopped and faced the youth. His eyes were ice.

"Perhaps. But think—think of the coming year. You shall win Elissa, and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad. Win Elissa and drive Carlo mad——"

His voice was like his violin, playing and replaying the same damnable, wheedling trill until it surged through Nicolo's brain.

"Think not of revenge. Go to the Cave of Fools a year from tonight; but first, win Elissa and drive Carlo mad——"

Still whispering the words, Paganini turned in the darkness and disappeared. And Nicolo walked the streets, muttering to himself:

"I shall win Elissa and drive Carlo mad."

6

NICOLO did not stay at his father's inn when he returned. He had money now, and he procured rooms in town—rooms below the apartment of the newlywed couple he had followed.

He did not see them for a month. He was in his dark room with the violin. He played in darkness now, for he needed no notes in this composition. He developed only two themes. One was soft and sweet and tender, thrilling was passionate beauty. As Nicolo played, his face would glow in ecstasy and warmth flooded his being.

The second theme slithered out of the darkness. Then it padded. Then it began to run, and leap, and dance. At first it squeaked like a rat, then it howled like a dog, finally it bayed like a black wolf. It was a fiendish howling of terrific power, and when Nicolo played it his hands trembled and he closed his eyes.

For a month Nicolo played the two themes over and over in his tiny room—alone. Not quite alone, for there was a whispering in his brain that prompted each tone, and an unseen hand that guided the bow over the strings. Nicolo played and played, and he grew thin and gaunt. After a month the music was a part of him, and he was ready.

It took him a week to become friendly with his neighbors again. In another week he had learned their habits; knew when Carlo worked at the wine-press and left Elissa alone.

Then, one afternoon, Nicolo visited Elissa. She sat regal in her blond beauty while they talked, and after a while Nicolo suggested that he play something for her. He took out his violin and drew the bow across the strings, eyes on her face.

His eyes never left her face while he played. His eyes feasted on her face as the music feasted on her soul.

The tune came forth, reiterated; in end-

less variations it rose in soaring rhapsody. And Elissa rose in soaring rhapsody and came toward him, her eyes empty save for the soul-filling majesty of the music.

Then Nicolo put down the violin and took her in his arms.

He came the next day, and the next. Always he brought his violin. Always he played and always she surrendered to the music.

For months Nicolo was happy. For many months he played each day, and his nights were peaceful at last. Carlo suspected nothing.

Nicolo began to plan. In a little while he would return to Milan for the solo concert. After that he would be famous—go on tour. He had, under the inspiration of his love, written enough to insure his success at the debut. He would take Elissa with him, and together they would scale the heights.

Then he remembered.

He could not go to Milan, or the concert. That night he had an appointment in the Cave of Fools.

Nicolo didn't want to die. He didn't want to give his soul. That cursed bargain!

But there was no way out.

Every day he saw Elissa he longed for life with greater fervor. Knowing the end was near, he came oftener, took greater and greater chances. He was counting the hours now, the minutes.

Three days before the time appointed he went there in the evening. Carlo would be late at the wine-press, so Nicolo played. Elissa sat there, her face blank as it always was when he played. Sometimes Nicolo would find himself wishing that he had no music to do his wooing—that he himself would inspire such adoration in the woman he loved. But that was too much to hope for; Elissa loved Carlo, and only the music gave her to Nicolo. It sufficed. The spell was strong. Nicolo played tonight as he had never played before, and as the music rose it drowned out the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

Carlo was in the room.

NICOLO stopped playing.

Elissa's eyes opened as though she were wakening from profound depths of sleep.

And Carlo faced them both. He was a big man, Carlo, with strong hands that now opened and closed convulsively at his sides. Carlo's heavy body was lunging across the room and the hands moved for Nicolo's throat.

They never reached it.

Nicolo's delicate hands were on the violin. He began to play.

It was not the love-strain that he played this time. It was the other—the song of madness.

At the sound of the rat-like squeaking Carlo stopped. Nicolo watched him as the shrieking mounted. Carlo's eyes grew wide. The shrieking became a moan. Carlo's wide eyes were growing red. The moaning was a rising bark, a yelp of agony. Carlo's hands went to his head. He stepped back, sank to his knees. Then Nicolo played. The violin screamed, the bow moved up and down upon it like a red-hot poker descending on human flesh. Nicolo played until Carlo lay rolling on the floor, baying in rhythm as the foam poured from his lips. Nicolo played until the room pulsed with horrid sound, until the glass shivered with the vibration and the candlelight wavered and the flame danced in agony. Nicolo played, and then he stopped.

Carlo lay there moaning, and he rose to his knees and looked at Nicolo. Then he looked at Elissa.

Nicolo followed his glance.

Elissa—he had forgotten Elissa! He had played the music of madness and forgotten she was in the room.

Elissa lay where she had fallen and her face was white with the unmistakable whiteness of death. Carlo looked at her and began to laugh.

Nicolo sobbed. Tears rolled down his cheeks.

Husband and lover laughed and sobbed together.

It was all over. She was dead, and he was mad. And two nights from now Nicolo must go to that rendezvous in the Cave of Fools.

So this was Satan's gift! This awful mockery was what it had brought him.

The dead woman lay on the floor as the madman crawled toward her, cackling.

Nicolo rose to go. His bow accidentally scraped the strings. The mad Carlo rose, laughing, and seized the violin. He broke it across the bridge and hurled it from the window.

Still laughing, he turned, but there was no sane hatred in his eyes.

And then the thought came to Nicolo.

"Carlo," he whispered. "Carlo."

The idiot husband laughed.

"Carlo, your wife is dead. But I did not kill her. I swear it. It was the Devil, Carlo. The Devil who dwells in the Cave of Fools. You want to avenge your wife's death, don't you, Carlo? Then seek out the Devil two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. Remember, Carlo—two nights from tonight in the Cave of Fools. I will stay with you until then and tell you where to go."

The madman laughed.

Softly, Nicolo repeated his suggestion. He whispered it all that night as the deranged Carlo slept. He whispered it the next day as they sat beside the body of the dead woman. At last, when Nicolo rose to leave on the coach for Milan, he felt that Carlo understood and would go. Smiling, the violinist withdrew, leaving the chuckling lunatic and his dead wife in the dark room.

7

IN THE night of travel Nicolo smiled bitterly but often. It had worked out after all! He would trick Satan then; sending Carlo in his stead. Thus he could play the concert and go on to fame. Poor Elissa was dead, of course, but there were other women to hear the song of love. It was good.

It was good to hear the praise in Milan. His old teachers spoke, his friends gathered around him and whispered of the celebrities who would attend the concert tonight.

Nicolo was so busy that day that he forgot a very important item. Indeed, he had just finished a meal in his dressing-room when he remembered.

Carlo had broken his violin!

Confused by tragedy, by lack of sleep and overmuch planning, it had slipped Nicolo's thoughts. His violin—not a precious instrument to him, for Nicolo knew that he could produce his music on any violin. Still, it was necessary.

He rose to summon the director, when the door opened. Carlo entered.

Carlo was mad. His eyes glittered and his teeth were bared, but he walked erect. He was able to control himself sufficiently to pass unnoticed, it seemed.

Nicolo, beholding him, nearly froze on the spot. A wave of fear rose chokingly in his throat.

"Carlo—why are you here? Don't you remember—the Cave of Fools and your appointment?"

Carlo grinned.

"I went last night, Nicolo," he whispered. "I went last night. Tonight I am here to see you play. You will be playing soon, Nicolo."

Nicolo stammered wildly. "But—but what did you find in the Cave? I mean—there was One who waited, and he wanted something from you——?"

Carlo grinned wider.

"Do not trouble yourself. I gave Him what He wanted. It was all arranged last night."

"You mean that?" Nicolo whispered. *"You gave your soul?"*

"I gave my soul. We made a bargain," Carlo chuckled.

"Then why are you here?"

"To bring you this. I broke your violin, and tonight you must play."

Carlo thrust a bundle into Nicolo's hands. At that moment the prompter entered.

"Maestro! The concert is starting. You are wanted on stage. Oh, what a crowd is here for your debut! Ah, there has never been such a tribute—you played but once, a year ago, but they remember and have returned. It is wonderful! But hurry, hurry!"

Nicolo left, and the grinning Carlo followed, standing in the wings as the violinist stepped on the stage. In his confusion, Nicolo unwrapped the parcel and tossed the paper to the wings as he took the violin and bow in his hands and faced the applauding audience.

Nicolo's eyes sparkled. This was triumph!

His heart was light within him. Fame was here, and poor Carlo had settled matters with the Master. He had made a bargain, and that did not concern Nicolo. What concerned him was that he was free, and this was the greatest evening of his life, and he would play as he had never played before.

Automatically he gripped the violin and raised it to his chin. It felt heavy; an ordinary instrument. But it would suffice. Poor Carlo was mad; bringing a violin to the man who had killed his wife!

But—*play.*

Yes, play with the Devil's gift, play the Devil's love-song that won Elissa. Let it win the audience tonight. What matter the violin, or Carlo chuckling in the wings? Play!

NICOLO played. His bow stroked the opening strains of the melody. But a droning arose.

What was wrong?

Nicolo tried to correct his stroke. But his fingers moved automatically. He tried to stop.

But his fingers, his wrist, his arm moved on. He could not stop. The power within him would not swerve. And the droning increased.

This was the song of madness!

Nicolo's fingers flew, his arm flailed. He fought, trying to hold back. But the sounds increased. Rats scurried and chittered and then the hounds of Hell began to bark. Fiends brayed in his brain.

Yes—in *his* brain.

The audience, he dimly realized, was hooting and jeering. They were not being driven mad by the music. *He* was!

Nicolo closed his eyes, clenched his jaw to make the violin slip; and still it played. He wanted to think of something else, anything but the music that now shrieked in his skull. A vision of Paganini's satanic face, of Elissa's dead features, of Carlo's mad red eyes, of the black Cave of Fools where he should be tonight—these things swept on wings of horror through his brain. And then the music broke through and Nicolo fiddled madly.

Eyes jerked open and stared down at the violin—at the coarse wood, the peculiar strings, the ghastly bridge glistening with pearly brilliance.

And then the voice of the music screamed the truth to him. Mad Carlo had gone to the Cave of Fools last night, to make a bargain. He had said that, and Nicolo had believed that it meant he was free. But what had that bargain been?

Carlo had sold his soul for vengeance. What could that vengeance be?

That One had told him to make this violin!

And now Nicolo stared at the violin—the violin he was helplessly playing, but which made a music that drove him mad.

Nicolo stared at the coarse wood. He had seen such wood before. Where? *Why did it remind him of Elissa?*

The wood was stained red; ghastly red. *Why did the red stain remind him of Elissa?*

Music thundered in Nicolo's ears, and still he played and stared.

The glistening bridge of the violin was pearly. *Why did that bridge remind him of Elissa?*

The bridge grinned up at Nicolo, grinned insanely as Elissa had grinned when she was driven mad by music. The violin tones rose to a shattering crescendo, and Nicolo staggered. His blurring eyes glanced at the golden strings of the violin that were singing his doom. In a burst of ghastly fear he seemed to recognize them.

Why did those strings remind him of Elissa?

And then he understood.

The music he was playing was the music that had driven her to madness, to death. In some way this violin now held her soul

He was not playing a violin, he was playing her soul, and its madness was pouring out to drive him mad!

He looked down again as the shrieking music rose in his ears, and he saw.

He did not hold a violin in his arms, but the dead body of a woman—the body of Elissa. He was playing on her body, playing on the gray ghost of her body, drawing the bow across long golden strands that he recognized in a final burst of fear that tore his brain to shreds.

Nicolo played her body like a violin and drew the madness out into his own being, and then he recognized the wood, the stain, the bridge, and the horribly familiar strings.

That was why Elissa's soul was in the violin!

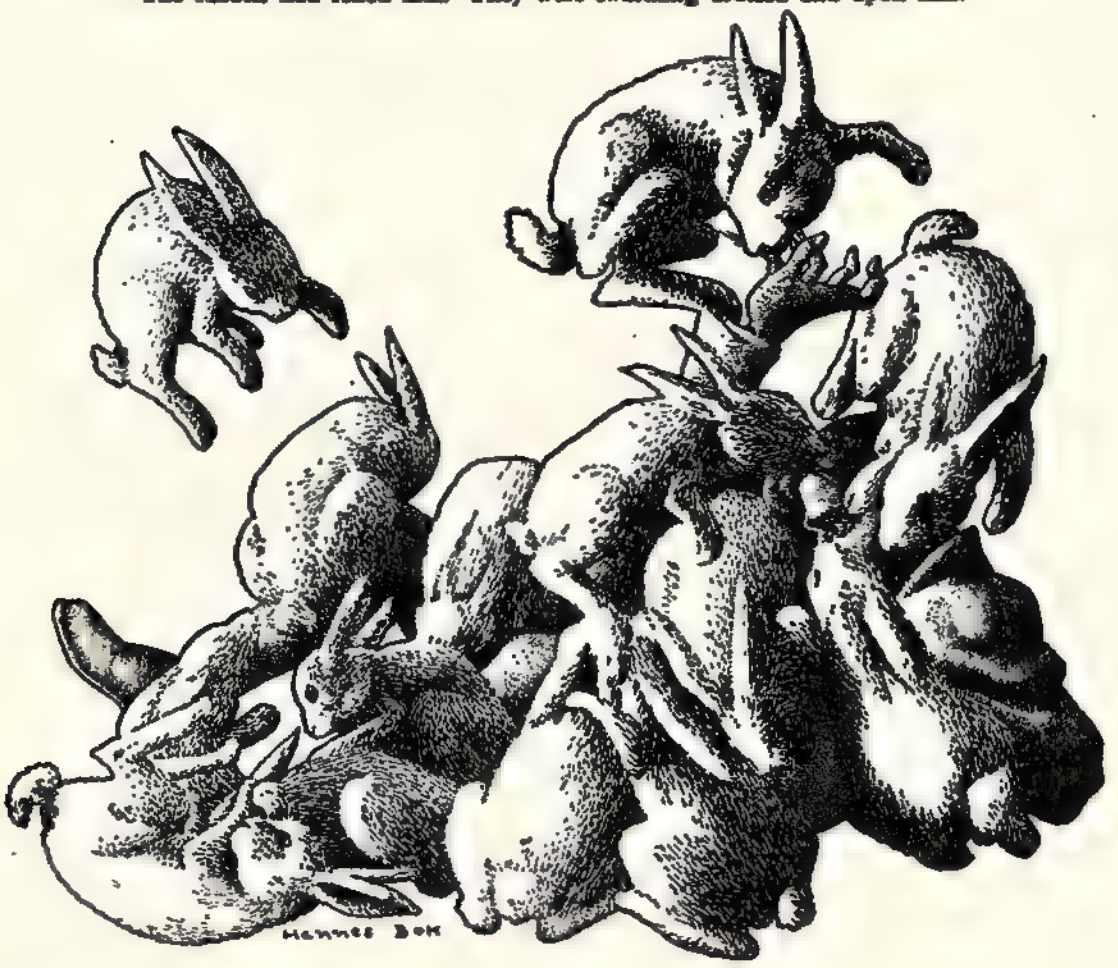
Nicolo suddenly began to laugh, insanely, and the music rose to drown out his laughter as he held the horrible thing playing in his arms. Then with a lurch Nicolo fell, face black with agony.

The curtains dropped, the hysterical manager ran to the dead body of the violinist.

Then the madman that was Carlo crept slyly from the wings and crouched over the body, tittering in a shrill voice. He took the violin from the dead Nicolo's breast and laughed.

His fingers lovingly caressed the wood he had carved from Elissa's coffin, the stain of blood he had drawn from Elissa's body, the pearly teeth on the bridge he had taken from Elissa's throat. And finally, his fingers fell to stroking the long, smooth golden strings on which the music of madness had been played—the long, golden strands of dead Elissa's hair.

"The rabbits had felled him. They were swarming around and upon him."



The Dreadful Rabbits

By GANS T. FIELD

One hardly thinks of rabbits as murderous wild beasts, and yet—
The author of "The Witch's Cat" and "Fearful Rock" has a theory.

". . . there are a hundred things one has to know, which we understand and you don't, as yet. I mean passwords, and signs, and sayings which have power and effect, and plants you carry in your pocket, and verses you repeat, and dodges and tricks you practise; all simple enough when you know them, but they've got to be known. . . ."

—Kenneth Grahame,
The Wind in the Willows

AT A POINT about four miles out of Crispinville, a lean-looking rabbit, with black-and-white smudgings on the gray of his ears and long hind legs, came flopping out on the pavement and paused in full way of the car. Morgan Pitts put on the brakes, drew out a handkerchief and mopped the summer

heat from his flushed, seamed brow. He said, with casual courtesy: "Howdy, Mister Rabbit!"

The animal immediately finished its crossing of the road, and sat up in a tussock of grass, gazing while Pitts started the car again. Judge Keith Hilary Pursuivant, big and blond and bespectacled, returned the gaze of those bulging black eyes. They seemed to have a green flash in them. He made no remark, but appeared deeply interested, and he was. He had come all the way to Crispinville for the very purpose of learning about the custom of rabbit-greeting.

After they rounded a curve and left the little town well out of sight, Judge Pursuivant ventured his query:

"How old is that custom of speaking to rabbits, Mr. Pitts? And how did it start?"

Pitts scratched his grizzled head. He was little and spry-looking, with a face as red as a rooster's comb. "Dunno, Judge Pursuivant. Ain't kept up much on things, been pretty busy with my work. But I guess it's been goin' on since the Year One. . . ." He took a hand from the wheel and pointed ahead. "There's my place, up yonder, next to Hungry Hill. Your friend's rented a room there for you. You and him are my only boarders this summer."

A phrase had caught the judge's ear. "Hungry Hill?" he repeated, and gazed at the great green swelling, with its thatchy covering of evergreen brush and thicket. "It doesn't look hungry."

"I think that's the old Injun name. And there's a cave or pit, like an open mouth—" The driver broke off. "Well, here we are, getting there."

The house nestled comfortably at the foot of the big hill, with plump-looking trees around it—a house old and modest, but well built and well kept, with a stable and barn and rail-enclosed stock pen behind.

As the car stopped, someone came out on the porch and waved a long arm, then hurried down to shake hands with Pursuivant.

It was Ransome. He looked much improved in health and spirits since Pursuivant had last seen him, at New York in early spring. The doctors had apparently sent him to the right part of the country to get over his nervous breakdown. He was still gaunt, but there was color in his flat cheeks and sparkle in the dark eyes set deep under the bushy brows. Ransome was forty and looked younger, with a square, shallow jaw and black hair and mustache like curls of astrakhan.

"I saw your train come in, over yonder along the horizon," he told the judge, "and I sat out here to wait for Mr. Pitts to bring you back. Come on, both of you, and have a drink."

THEY followed him into a pleasant front room, with ancient flower-figured paper and white-painted woodwork, and massive old furniture that was older and better preserved than any of them. Ransome had set out a tray, with bottles, glasses, and a bowl of cracked ice.

"I thought that rabbit legend would fetch you when I wrote to you about it," he said to Pursuivant. "You collect such things, don't you? Hard to believe—but I've seen the bunny greeted on every road and path in Crispinville Township."

"Mr. Pitts here told me something about it," said Pursuivant. "Not much, though—not as much as I'd like to hear."

"Nobody seems to know much about it," Ransome said, pouring. "It's pretty well a local thing. Over in the next county, people hadn't even heard of it—said I was making it up. There's ice here, gentlemen. Take it or leave it?"

"Take it," said Pitts, with relish.

"Leave it," said Pursuivant, "and not much soda. . . . If you haven't any infor-

mation, Ransome, you must have a theory. You skeptics always have theories."

Ransome poured whiskey and spurted soda into the glasses. "Hnnn," he said, "might be a Negro thing—this used to be slave territory. One storekeeper in Crispinville thinks it may have come from the first English colonists; again, it might be Indian. But what keeps it so local? Can't you tell us, Pitts?"

"Not me," said Pitts, his eyes on the dewy glass held out to him.

They all drank. Pursuivant wiped his blond mustache. His spectacles were full of thoughtful lights.

"The rabbit's a great figure in folklore," he observed. "A witch named Julian Cox was tried in England in the 1660's, for turning into a rabbit. And Jules de Grandin once told me that southern French will turn back from a day's work because a hare hopped across their trail—bad luck, like a black cat."

"Never heard that," rejoined Ransome. "Of course, de Grandin's a fable-collector, like you. Of course, I read Uncle Remus when I was a boy—plenty of rabbit stuff there."

"And I used to carry the left hind foot of a graveyard rabbit for luck," contributed Pitts, sipping at his highball.

Pursuivant was also turning over the Uncle Remus tales in his mind. They were impressive and sometimes grim, for all the bright humor of Joel Chandler Harris. Br'er Rabbit, seemingly so harmless and plausible, had tricked all the larger and fiercer creatures in self-defense, or for profit, or for mere cruel fun; hadn't Br'er Wolf been deluded into killing his own children, and Br'er Fox shunted into a fire so that all his progeny looked singed, down into the present day?

"Don't you think," Ransome was saying, "that you're paying too much attention to a silly little custom—a triviality?"

"Hey," protested Pitts, taking his nose from his glass, "it ain't silly when it's a township ordinance—you can't even hunt rabbits."

"And there are no trivialities in life, as Sherlock Holmes or somebody said," added Pursuivant. "As Mr. Pitts suggests, there must be a good reason for making the rule, and for observing it as well."

Ransome laughed loudly. His own drink had been long and strong, and he was at the bottom of it. "Time for me to do some missionary work," said he. Rising, he took two objects from the table.

They were the stock and barrels of an excellent shotgun, and they snicked neatly together in his knowing hands. He grinned above the weapon. "It's summer, and rabbit's aren't fit to eat, but just for the sake of smashing a superstition—" And he fed two shells into the double breech.

Pitts got up. "Better not do it, Mr. Ransome. It's 'gainst the law."

"I'll pay any fine, or whatever," laughed Ransome.

Pursuivant also rose, and set down his empty glass. "I want to go back to town and look into the community records. I'll leave my suitcase, and be back before sundown."

"Shall I run you back in the car?" offered Pitts.

"No, thanks. It's fine weather and lovely country, and only four miles. I'll walk." Pursuivant turned to Ransome. "Promise me you won't go rabbit-hunting until I return."

"Oh, all right," Ransome agreed, and stood the gun in a corner. He saw the judge to the door.

CRISPINVILLE was not the county seat, but Pursuivant knew that there would be a township trustee, a clerk and a constable. When he reached the ham-

let, he approved once again the well-painted old houses and the quaint little stores with canopy-like arcades jutting out over the wooden sidewalk, admired the square-steepled church that dominated all. He estimated that what Pitts called "the Year One" for this community would be well before the middle of the Eighteenth Century.

"There were settlers here before Daniel Boone's time," he thought, and inquired for the home of the township clerk. Finding it, he introduced himself.

The clerk was a frail ancient named Simmons, who prided himself on having most of his teeth and needing no spectacles. He was vague about old records, and only when Pursuivant pleaded did he pry into the clutter of files and trunks that jammed a rear room of his house.

"I been the Chrispinville clerk for forty-four years," he grumbled, "and nobody never asked to see them original papers. Huh, they must be in this here oldest chest."

The oldest chest was very old indeed, made of unpainted hard wood from which a covering of rawhide was all but rotted away. Mr. Simmons probed and fiddled in the rusty lock with a brass key that might have gone with Noah's strong box, once or twice calling on heaven to witness his displeasure that the guards did not turn; but then Pursuivant stepped to his side and lifted the lid with a creak of the hinges—the lock had never been fastened. Inside lay papers, yellow and dusty, tied into bundles with antediluvian-looking twine. Simmons examined one handful, then another.

"Yep, these is the old records. Huh, the oldest bunch will be on the bottom, I expect." He dug down, and brought up a sheaf. "This is what you'll want, Judge."

Pursuivant took the papers, unfastened the string, and carefully unfolded them to avoid breaking at the creases. They were covered with writing in rusty ink. At the head of the first was printed in block letters, crude and archaic but forceful:

RECORDES OF
Ye TOWN COUNCIL OF CRISPINVILLE,
FOUNDED Yis DAY Ye 14 JUNE,
ANNO REGNII GEORGII II
NONO

The ninth year of the region of George II; Pursuivant computed that it would be 1735 when Crispinville was founded as a formal community. The clerk let him carry the documents into the dining-room and spread them on the top of the table.

THE paper on which the records had been written was not of the best, and two centuries had made it brittle and teatan; but the first clerk of the township had written fluently and in a good bold hand, with all the underlinings and capitalizations of his age. There was a list of names, with official titles opposite, some half-dozen members of that original council. Then, as the first item of history:

> This day we, the Chosen Council of the Town of *Crispinville*, did pay to certain Indians the Price agreed upon for the Lands whereon our Company will live and plant and reap. . . .

The price was itemized, and Pursuivant saw that, as usual in such matters, the Indians had all the worst of it—gaudy cheap cloth, beads, rickety hatchets and knives, one or two muskets and a horn of powder, and certain bottles of raw New England rum. The screed went on, and suddenly Pursuivant was aware that, upon the very threshold of his researches, he had found the origin of the custom he was tracing:

> . . . The Indians engaging on their Part to respect our Rights and Boundaries and to keep the Peace, asking only that we observe their Manner of (as our Interpreter putteth) *Greeting the Hare;* that is, we shall not hunt Hares nor snare them, but upon meeting

them, salute and bespeak them as apertly as it were a *Christian Man*, and not a silly Hare.

To this last, certain of our Company did take Exception, and notably *Capt. Scadlock*, that such Custom was Childish and Fond; but the Chief Person of the Savages, him they call *King Mosh*, did bide firm, saying that the Rabbit was the *Ototemon* of their People and sacred; and further that if we pledged not our Word to continue their Custom, they would never sell the Land, be the Price paid Ten Times Over. And finally the *Rev. Mr. Horton*, our Minister of *God*, did earnestly pray us to give over, shewing that we had Precedent in that the First Missionaries to *Britain* did respect and observe certain Festivals and Useages of the old Heathen; saying further that, right so as we took pity of these simple Indians their Beliefs, right so would they incline to stand our Friends. And so it was agreed upon both Sides, we all signing our Names, saving only *Capt. Scadlock*, and the Matter placed of Record and made a Rule whereby to Govern and guide the Town henceforth.

Pursuivant smiled in his mustache as he read, a smile of scholarly relish. He could see in his mind's eye that meeting, the stark jack-booted colonists and the brown, insistent savages. King Mosh—he had spoken out well for his people and faith, even against Captain Scadlock, who undoubtedly was the chief of the colony's armed forces; and the minister, Mr. Horton, had shown rare tact and liberality—perhaps, good man, he had hoped for converts among those Indians on whose behalf he spoke.

But that hope had been in vain, Pursuivant saw as he read further in the records. Less than a year later there had been a fight, and it had gone against the Indians. The same clerk wrote:

. . . and a Searching Party, following the tracks of *Captain Scadlock* upon the Second Day after his Vanishment, did trace him to that Hill which the Indians do call *Gonto-lab* (that is, the *Hungry Hill*). . . .

"Hello!" muttered Pursuivant, half aloud. "That's the hill back of Pitt's place!"

. . . and did find him, at the Mouth of the Cave near the Summit; and he had perished miserably, of many small Wounds, so thick upon him that no Inch of his Skin remained whole, nor did any Jot of his Blood remain unto him. And the Indians swore by their false gods that he came to his Death for failing to *greet the Hare*, rather pursuing and slaying Hares upon the Hill; which we took as meaning to say, that they themselves had slain the Captain. Wherefore, falling to our Arms. . . .

The remainder of the account was unsavory, and dealt with a one-sided conflict. The dead Indians were scalped, it seems, and the prisoners taken all hanged. A few survived and escaped the carnage. That had finished the savages in the vicinity. Only the name of the hill, and the rabbit-greeting, remained to memorialize them.

At this moment, the clerk came in and tapped his shoulder.

"Judge," he said, "here's Morgan Pitts come to find you."

Pursuivant looked up, his big forefinger marking the place on the old sheet of paper. Pitts came in, his eyes wide with serious wonder. "Judge Pursuivant," he said, "Mr. Ransome hasn't come back."

"Hasn't come back from where?"

"He went hunting for a rabbit—"

Simmons made a choking sound of protest, and Pursuivant sprang to his feet, quick as a cat for all his bulk. "Hunting for a rabbit? He promised me—"

Pitts nodded glumly. "Yes, sir, I know he did. But when you left, Mr. Ransome, he took his gun and went out. Said he'd be back in fifteen minutes. But"—the man's lips were quivering—"but he ain't. I think, Judge, you better come."

The old records of Crispinville, telling of superstition and pioneering and grim battle, had cracked and crumbled in Pursuivant's clenching hands. He laid down the remains.

"Have you brought your car, Mr. Pitts? All right, we'll drive back together."

THE house was still empty when they got there. Pursuivant moved away through the back yard, across a meadow and among brush and small trees at the foot of the hillside. It was as bright and hot as a tropical seashore. The judge's blue eyes had found and followed the trail of Ransome's tennis shoes. Pitts followed just behind.

"It's bad stuff, hunting rabbits," he chattered. "Folks around here don't believe in it—and when people don't believe—"

"It's best to string along with such beliefs, I agree," finished Pursuivant for him. "Look, Mr. Pitts. He found a rabbit trail here—fresh."

They could see that Ransome had squatted down above the pattern of little pawprints in the leaf-mold; his toes only made deep depressions, and beside them was the narrow oval where he had rested the gunstock. Then he had risen and followed the game slantwise up the hill. Pursuivant and Pitts went up after him, through dragging belts and tangles of brush, some of it thorny. Pitts spoke again:

"Look, Judge." He pointed with a knobby old forefinger to a whole clutter of tracks. "More rabbits—Mr. Ransome's hunting a mess of them."

The judge's shaggy head shook. "I'm afraid not. See here—some of the pawprints fall over Mr. Ransome's shoe-marks. This bunch—flock—whatever you call a number of rabbits—it came along later. Mr. Ransome is hunting only that first one that made the lone trail."

"I see," said Pitts softly. "I see; and these other rabbits—are—*hunting Mr. Ransome!*"

IT WAS hotter than they had thought, as they pushed through one more clump of brambly growth, and came to where hunters and hunted had met.

They had not the time nor the wish to read more than the essentials of the story written in large tracks and small upon the soft, spurned earth. Pursuivant began talking swiftly, pointing here and there.

"Look! Ransome stopped and, probably, aimed his gun. He was looking yonder, perhaps at that dark hollow place among those vine-grown saplings. The rabbit must have stopped there." He crossed over and peered. "Yes—see! The tracks were turned toward Ransome. It stopped and turned on its heels, to look at him."

"Like it was mocking him," said Pitts, and swallowed hard.

Pursuivant looked at the leaves behind the tracks. They were cut to pieces by shot—Ransome must have fired both barrels at that rabbit as it sat up to gaze at him. And then—

Pitts was down on one knee. "They swarmed over him as he fired!" he cried shakily. "Look, Judge—they rushed him from behind, right here!"

Pursuivant made a step and bent to pick up something from a patch of leafy weeds. "His gun!" he said, and snapped open the breech. "Both barrels were fired—he must have thrown it at them. Then he was unarmed."

He returned to where Pitts kneeled. The flurry of tracks seemed to say that Ransome had fallen, as under the impact of many missiles; what those missiles were could be deduced from the strength of certain hind-leg marks, telling of how rabbits had sprung straight upward and at the face or chest. The gun still in his hand, Pursuivant stooped to make out what had happened to Ransome then.

Here were hand-prints, deeply driven, as though weight had been supported upon the palms. Here was the scrape of a dragged knee, and another, with repetitions beyond—yes, Ransome had crept upon his hands and knees, stunned, wretched, driven. For at either flank of

his trail were the trails of his little adversaries, herding and harrying him, toward the dark opening among the vines where he had seen and fired upon the quarry that was really a decoy.

"Poor Mr. Ransome," Pitts was saying. "He should have obeyed the law—you got to respect things like that, or—"

"Stay behind me," commanded Pursuivant, and bent, thrusting with the muzzle of the shotgun into the space among the vines.

Within was empty gloom, for here the hill rose abruptly under a masking of herbage, and in it was a cave.

"Gontolah—the Hungry Hill," remembered Pursuivant. Yes, as Pitts had said, this place looked like an open, starved mouth, a lune-shape hole with a flat rim of rock above and another below, like gaping lips. And something was wedged in that mouth-like cavern.

He forced himself to touch it. His fingers closed on a slack, damp wrist. With a heave and a scrape, he dragged the body into view.

Yes, it was Ransome, or what had been Ransome. Pursuivant knew him by the contours of that pounded, lacerated head, by the leanness of the blood-boltered body inside chopped-up rags.

Pitts whimpered as the thing came into the light.

"Poor Mr. Ransome," he said again. "Now I know how—*oh!*"

Pursuivant whirled like a top at that final gasp of horror. He saw, too, what Spencer had seen.

The spaces among the bushes along their back trail were full of rabbits, all lean and gray with black and white blazings on legs and ear-tips, and all a trifle larger than ordinary. Every eye in that horde was turned upon the two men, and the eyes of meat-eating animals. They were an army, moving concertedly and purposefully upon the judge and Pitts, who stood cut off with their backs to the cave.

Pursuivant's big fists tightened on Ransome's shotgun. He would not throw it, he told himself at once—clubbed, its metal-shod butt would smash these little assailants to rags. But Pitts was trying another weapon.

With eyes and outstretched hands he addressed himself to the foremost of the rabbits, the one that moved cautiously but steadily ahead of the press, like an officer leading troops in an orderly advance. He spoke, audibly and with a tremble of fear:

"H-howdy, Mister Rabbit!"

There was a momentary pause in the oncoming torrent of fur. A little eddy showed, then a parting in the ranks. They were making a way for Pitts to retreat through them, and he needed not a moment to make up his mind. He fairly darted along that open lane, which closed behind him. The expanse of fuzzy backs and upturned green eyes resolidified, and above it Pitts looked back at Pursuivant.

"Better say the words," he advised huskily. "They're closing in on you."

THEY converged slowly and smoothly, flowing like a puddle of grease—but grease scummed over with fur and green-black eyes, sprouting a meadow of ears. Pursuivant lifted the clubbed shotgun and set himself to strike. The leader-rabbit sprang suddenly at him. Pursuivant swung the gun, as a batter strikes at a ball. He could not miss—but the weapon swished thinly in the air, and the little sinewy body struck him at the base of the throat. A moment later more rabbits were springing at him—a dozen, a score, hundreds. His flailing with the gun did not find a single mark. He swayed under the bombardment, but kept his feet—he was stronger and bulkier than Ransome, he would take more battering to bring down—

"Say the words, Judge!" Pitts's voice

pleaded with him from beyond. "They ain't real rabbits—they'll finish you!"

Fighting, clawing at the rain of buffets, Pursuivant found his mind turning from the struggle to consideration of something else. What had the Indian, King Mosh, called the rabbit? *Ototemon*. Strange word. But with a familiar sound . . . suddenly he saw blue expanse, fringed with green. The sky among the treestops looked into his face, for he had come down upon his back. The rabbits had felled him. They were swarming around and upon him, their feet striking like great raindrops, incessantly and with precision—a rhythm that sapped his strength and his consciousness—again and again, on the same places.

How could he escape these airy blows and kicks? There seemed one way to crawl along—but it would lead to the cave, where Ransome had been. And once caught there, they'd have him. They'd dance upon him forever and forever, until he died, torn and bled to death by uncountable strokes—it would be like the falling of water upon a Chinese victim of the old drop-death—

"Say the words!" beseeched Pitts tearfully, his voice faint as an echo. "Say the words—howdy—"

Ototemon—the term meant something sacred to the Indians. And the minister, Mr. Horton, had gone on record as saying that the honest faith of savages could be respected, must be respected—

Somehow he got upon his feet, and lifted his hands as Pitts had done.

"Howdy," he mumbled thickly. "Howdy, Mister Rabbit."

And he stumbled and staggered away. Nothing prevented him. Pitts's hand caught his arm, supporting him. He was safe, being led downhill.

"Who'll believe?" he was saying to himself. "Who'll believe? . . ."

"Don't worry, Judge," Pitts replied. "We're all right now. And this has happened before—all the folks say that the rabbits kill people near that cave. When some stranger drops out of sight, the folks go look for them and bury them—it ain't thought strange any more—I'll get a couple of men from town to help me bring back Mr. Ransome—"

Pursuivant was content to leave it at that. Later he would write and make an inquiry of Dr. Trowbridge, de Grandin's friend and fellow-scholar of the occult.

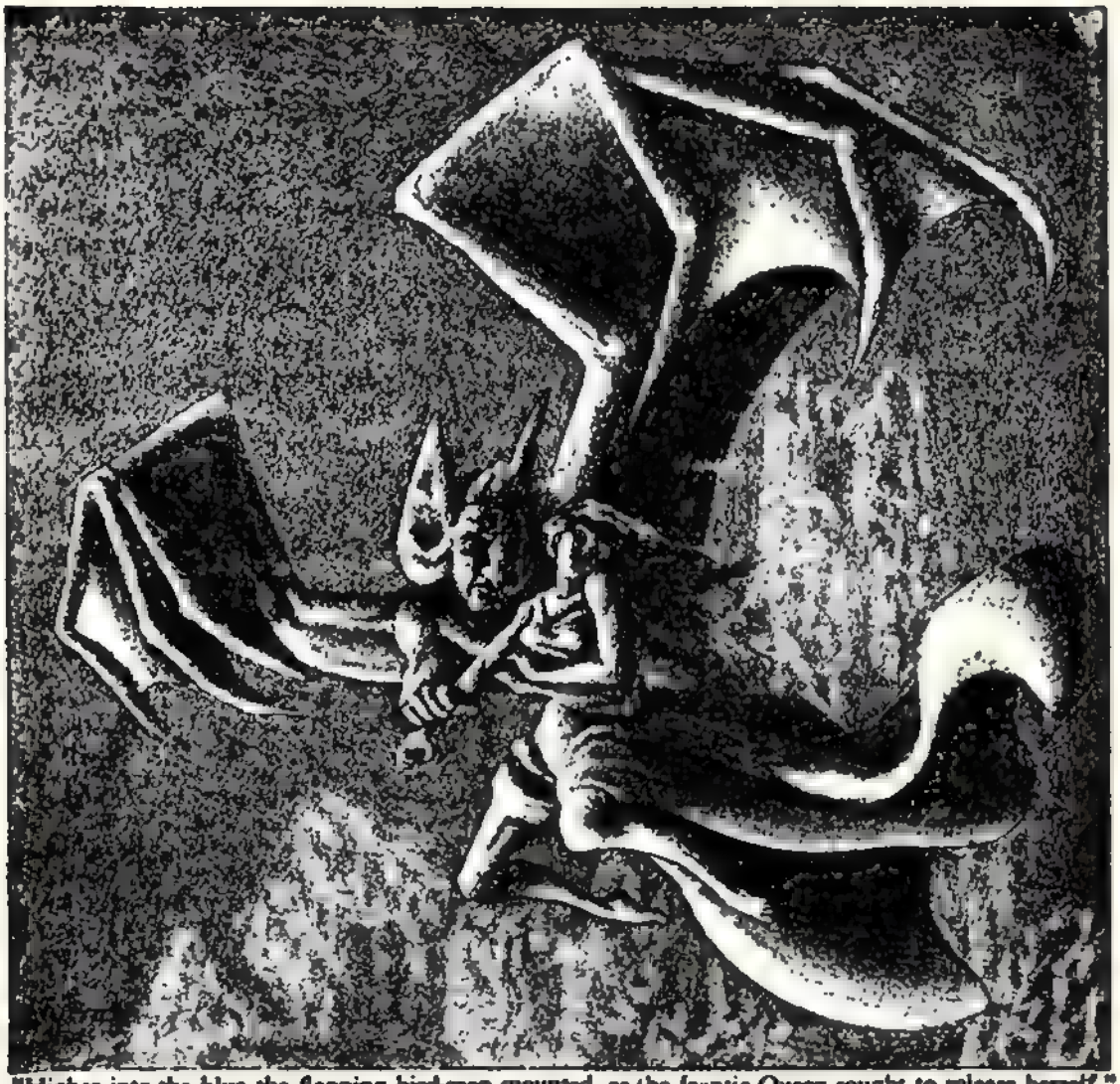
TROWBRIDGE'S letter came after the judge had returned to New York.

> My Dear Pursuivant:
>
> The meaning of the word *ototemon* should betray itself because of the familiarity of its corruption—*totem*. It's Algonquin and, as well as I can establish, means a local sacrosanctity, generally embodied in some animal. A tribe or clan or community would claim that such animals were in reality the reincarnated spirits of dead ancestors, and full of supernatural power for good or evil.
>
> I was sorry to hear about Ransome's death. Why are you so mysterious? De Grandin joins me in inviting you out to Huntingdon, to tell us about it. We have a strange story or two of our own that might intrigue you.
>
> Yours, etc.,

And Trowbridge's almost indecipherable signature wound it up.

Pursuivant laid down the letter and reasoned himself out of any sense of defeat. He had wanted to respect the custom from the first, had blamed Ransome for defying it. Mr. Horton, the long-dead minister of Crispinville, had felt the same. *"We had precedent in that the first Missionaries to Britain did respect and observe certain festivals. . . ."* It might be heathen to greet a rabbit, yet it was part of formal and sincere religion. And when you were in Crispinville, you should do what the Crispinvillagers did.

Judge Pursuivant decided not to feel fouled by his experience. Only he would never look at a rabbit again, and keep his heart from thumping nervously.



"Higher into the blue the flapping bird-man mounted, as the frantic Queen sought to release herself."

A Million Years in the Future

By THOMAS P. KELLEY

Thrilling interplanetary story of Tara the Glorious, Queen of the Stars; and the Black Raiders, destroyers of a thousand planets.

The Story Thus Far

JAN, prince of the Bardonians, mighty swordsman of the green planet, Earth, in the year 1,001,940, is captured by the Black Raiders—invaders from the sky and masters of planets and space—and carried away in their massive space-ships to the Moon of Lost Souls, to toil in the great fields. Jan's hatred against the Black Raiders is a bitter one, for, when he was but an infant, those same ebon warriors had stolen his mother for the harems of the nobles on their distant world, Capara.

In a space-ship, Jan escapes from the Moon of Lost Souls, together with Abel, the bird-man, and Vonna, princess of Penelope. They land on the weird Moon of Madness, and after many wild adventures the hardy Earthman finds the great god, Time himself, in a mighty, age-old tower. The hoary god tells of the tale of creation, and the treachery of his beauteous sister, Tara the Glorious, glamorous white queen of Capara. Jan is then given the strange crystal ring that will, if it but touches the golden Ball of Life that hangs above the throne of Tara, start the great mechanism that will, in ten days time, draw the tiny Moon of Madness across space and against Capara, with the force that will mean the destruction of both worlds.

Believing Vonna dead, and seeing a chance to avenge himself against the destroyers of his planet, the Earthman resolves to obliterate them. He fights for the fire-people (outsiders from a distant sun) against the Black Raiders in a colossal battle in space, is captured and taken to Capara, to the great golden city of Manator, and then before the throne of the glittering Tara, who in turn sends him to the arena to fight in the Great Games, where his strength and sword-arm soon win the plaudits of the kill-crazed millions. Then, one night, escaping from his cell below the arena, he at last reaches the stupendous throneroom of Tara—lonely and unguarded, for it is well past midnight—and touches the ring of Time against the Ball of Life.

His purpose accomplished, in fleeing from the throneroom, he becomes lost in a maze of winding corridors, till finally, coming upon a chamber of wondrous, barbaric beauty, he halts as a silvery voice reaches him. Then the silken curtains of the bed are suddenly swept aside, and from them steps the glorious queen of the stars!

The story continues:

PART IV

20. The Magic Mirror

FOR what seemed an eternity I stood there, watching her slow advance as that wondrous beauty came toward me, her wavy black hair tumbling to her shoulders, the sheer sleeping-robe making no pretense of concealing her white body.

Just before me she stopped; then her dark eyes widened in surprise.

"You!" she exclaimed. "The Earthman!"

Then, as I nodded: "But how does it come you are here?" she asked. "How were you able to escape from your cell and come here? True, I meant to have you transferred to the castle tomorrow, but now you have made that transfer needless. How did you do it—and why?" she insisted.

"It is always possible for a determined man to find what he wants," I answered, watching her tensely.

Tara the Glorious gave a slight start.

"I have it!" she exclaimed, her dark eyes lighting with a sudden joy. "You were looking for me! You were searching for me!"

The Queen of the stars gave that silvery

laugh which seemed to come from a million miles away.

"La, then it is no dream. I fall to sleep with the memory of you the last thing in my mind, then wake to find the mighty barbarian prince has escaped his prison, swum the Blue Lake, eluded my guards—killed several of them perhaps, then comes to my very bedroom to claim me for his captive!"

Tara the Glorious sank to the great couch beside her. "Was there ever such a man?" she exclaimed.

"But you need not remain standing, Prince Jan," she went on, pointing to a chair. "Do sit down and tell me about your many adventures this night—how your great muscles enabled you to escape from the pits beneath the arena, swim the Blue Lake, as well as all the other exploits that must go with it."

As she ceased speaking a low growl suddenly sounded from the far corner, and a large cat-like animal arose from where it had evidently been sleeping—a huge four-footed beast with a great head and a thick mane that I had noticed invariably sprawled at the feet of the beauteous one in the royal box at the Great Games. It had lain at the foot of her throne, too, the night I had been summoned to the throne-room—the royal pet, as I was to learn later.

Tara wheeled.

"Down, Ranga!" she ordered, and as the great beast slunk back into the corner: "My most faithful guard," she smiled, turning to me. "Strangely enough it has descended from a species of animal that once roamed your own planet, the Earth—an animal the ancients of your world called a lion. But come, Prince Jan, rest yourself."

A thousand thoughts raced through my mind as I did her bidding. Seated on a golden chair I watched that brilliant beauty. Did she really know what had brought me to her castle? Was she fully aware of what had happened in the throneroom, and was now but playing with me—leading me on?

"I am a poor narrator of events," I answered. "I prefer to perform, rather than talk them."

She nodded.

"Ah, I know that well. Fourteen times I have seen your flashing steel drip crimson in the arena, and I know. Yes; you fight with the strength of ten, Prince Jan, and I thrill as I watch you.

"And tomorrow," she went on, "I will watch you again. Tomorrow I will see you slay the Blue men as the thousands cheer, then watch as you come before me to claim the three wishes allotted to a survivor of the Great Games. I wonder what those three wishes will be?"

"Only tomorrow can tell, Queen Tara," I answered. "But surely I must go; I rob you of your sleep."

"No," she put in hastily, one perfect hand half raised in protest. "Stay. I am the Queen, my word supreme, my actions infallible and beyond censure. No, Prince Jan; stay and talk to me this lonely hour, while the rest of the world sleeps."

And she nestled deeper into the silken cushions of the couch, smiling, her tumbling black hair wavy and lustrous, the low V-shaped neck of her filmy sleeping-garment revealing perfect white shoulders.

"Suppose we talk of your world, your Majesty," I ventured; "of your armies, the stars and planets they have conquered."

That dazzling smile deepened.

"Always the warrior, thinking ever of battle and bloodshed. Perhaps I should put you in command of one of my fleets so that desire might be sated, for often my space-fleets have conquered as many as twenty worlds during their journeys far out in the trackless void.

"That of course was many years ago, before my power had begun to assert it-

self. Only rarely now do they come upon some star that has not already been conquered, and mostly they are occupied in collecting the ransoms I demand and in subduing the endless uprising; though occasionally some ship, traveling on and on through the limitless wastes, comes upon a strange star, which is soon conquered and subdued, or, if it is without wealth or fine slaves, destroyed."

"And tributes and treasures continue to come to Capara?" I asked.

"ENDLESSLY," she answered. "My great treasure castles at the bottom of the North Sea—Capara's mightiest ocean—groan with riches. My jewel vaults in the hallowed mountain of Zoranda threaten to burst that great mount asunder if they are increased. And yet each day the treasure-ships bring added riches and ransom, or else the news that some planet's wealth is exhausted and it is unable to pay; in which case my royal seal sends one of the fleets with the Vapors of Vengeance to destroy that unfortunate world."

And her ivory fingers toyed with the large signet ring she wore.

"Victories, always victories," I mused. "But was no world ever able to beat off your warriors and destroy their ships?" I asked.

"Yes, several of them. But I always sent other ships, then others, with their millions of fighting-men, till at last the worlds screamed for peace; which I sometimes granted and sometimes did not, but in all cases exacted a frightful vengeance.

"I recall once when we destroyed, the rat-men of Pambra—tall, white-skinned men of your own size, and human in every respect except for their hideous, rodent-like heads. Well, I had dispatched a fleet to conquer this Pambra—a star the ancients of your world called Venus—but it did not return. I then consulted my Magic Mirror, and was surprised to learn that the great mental powers of the rat-men had advanced them far in the field of hypnotism—so far that they had been able to waft my warriors into a trance-like condition, and were forcing them to toil in their fields as beasts of burden.

"I was amused, and secretly applauded their wisdom and strategy, but, of course, I had to destroy them. Yet as their world was rich in gold and jewels, as well as their great fields of agriculture, I did not wish the Vapors of Vengeance turned upon it, as that powerful red gas tarnishes all gold and jewels it touches."

"And so?" I put in unthinkingly.

"And so I knew there could be but one way," she went on, "—mental surrender. I had my scientists concoct a blue, fog-like vapor, that would neither tarnish nor kill, but all who breathed of its sweet aroma were doomed to an instant and permanent insanity, as it robbed the brain cells of their power.

"Thus I was able to conquer Pambra, for, staying aloft and encircling that planet, the fleet released the blue vapors from the tail of each ship. Then, after allowing time for the gasses to disperse, they landed. A few of the rat-men—now hopeless idiots—were returned to Capara for the experimental tables of my scientists; the rest destroyed. I then had a million conquered subjects—green people from a far-away star—migrated to Pambra in space-ships, to till its great fields and extract its great wealth; and today that world numbers some two billion submissive and dutiful subjects.

"But come, we will talk no more of me or my world—let us hear of yours; that bright green star you call the Earth."

"I am afraid there is little I can tell that you do not already know," I admitted. "For hundreds and hundreds of miles the dreary plains of my world stretch away to show only the occasional ruined cities of the ancients; then dreary moss-covered

wastes that were once the bottoms of mighty oceans, for today there are no great bodies of water—only the occasional small lake and stream."

"Yes, I know," she answered nodding. "And yet it was once a great world of thundering cities and hurrying billions."

"But how could you know that?" I asked.

The royal beauty gave a little gurgle of pleasure, enjoying my visible surprise.

"I surprise you, Prince Jan? Ah, but I know the history of the green star as well as I know this room—as well as I do the history of all the worlds my fleets have conquered.

"Come, I will show you."

Tara the Glorious rose to her tall, lovely height, with the grace of a falling leaf. To the corner of the room near the balcony she led me. Here a strange, screen-like mirror, some four feet square, composed of some sparkling material that shimmered and glittered, was supported by two side posts. We paused before it.

"Behold," said Tara, and there was a sudden solemnity in her voice. "One of my greatest treasures, composed of the star dust of distant worlds—the Magic Mirror!"

I looked at it with interest, for I realized by her tone that it was something of importance. "But what purpose does it serve?" I asked.

"It is a mirror that reflects thought," she answered, "as well as to recall from the centuries, even from the beginning of time, any scene or occurrence that might have happened on the various worlds. See, I stand before it thus and think of your world, desiring to witness the most important events that have occurred on it since it began. Watch carefully!"

FOR a moment there was nothing, and then that glittering screen suddenly came to life, presenting a series of pictures so startlingly realistic one felt they might talk to the characters in them. First I saw a great bubbling ball that filled nearly all the screen.

"Your world at its beginning," whispered the wondrous beauty beside me.

Then slowly that great globe ceased bubbling and grew hard. Of course, as the Queen explained, what happened on the screen in minutes had in reality taken centuries. Gradually there appeared great seas; then eons later (though on the screen it was but minutes) came land, vegetation, then life—weird beasts of mammoth size which crashed through leafy jungles and roamed great plains, then shaggy men with clothes of skin and knotted bludgeons, who hunted or were hunted by them, to give way in time to men of more human appearance.

Then came small dwellings, then larger ones, then great crowds of humans laboring on huge stone structures.

"The Egyptians," came the soft voice of Tara. "An ancient race of your world building the pyramids."

Then came pictures of wars—wars by land and wars by sea. We saw great armies march to battle. We saw thousands trampled down and overridden by great chariots and mailed horsemen, while the air was black with shooting arrows. We saw huge ships at sea meet and crash head on, then great flames rise and envelop them, while their struggling crews were swept to the waves, blood-smeared and screaming.

Then slowly civilization rose, and the screen showed great cities that grew larger and larger with the passing ages. Strange quadrupeds had appeared too; they seemed the universal mounts of those ancient days, as the fleet kangs had been to my own, for they carried the warriors to battle and drew their heavy carts and wagons.

Then suddenly they disappeared, to be replaced by countless tiny black cars that

hurried along at an amazing speed without any visible means of movement, while the heavens were black with little flying-ships, for by now the world had grown to a great populace, and its cities were huge and many.

"Observe closely," whispered Tara. "It is your world at the height of its power."

And indeed it was a wonderful world, and I thrilled to think that my planet had once known such greatness; a great world of mighty cities and broad highways that stretched on and on, while in its vast seas huge ships plowed steadily through the waves to distant shores with cargoes and their thousands of passengers, and all were prosperous and happy.

And then came destruction — another war, but this time one more terrible than all the others, a hideous struggle that seemed to be a war of the races, for we could see the yellow hordes struggling against the others, and smoke and flame was everywhere, and great cities crumbled and fell; till finally the world was covered with charred, smoking ruins, and most of its inhabitants lay dead.

Century followed century, but never again did the world know its former splendor; for all the arts seemed lost, and its people content to remain idle and dwell in the charred ruins of their ancestors. Then came invasions from the skies, then other invasions, then others—each more terrible than the last—while the world slowly dwindled in numbers and intellect, and its vast seas gradually dried up; till at last there remained but the few shallow lakes and streams, the great moss-covered wastes, dreary landscapes and the primitive tribes I had known.

And then came those final scenes that showed the ships of the Black Raiders encircling the Earth as they released the Vapors of Vengeance; and the few remaining tribes clutched at their throats, then died, and every animal staggered and fell, and the birds dropped lifeless to the ground, and only bleaching bones remained when the red gases at last lifted, to show the dismal and final ending of the green star.

And then the scene grew hazy and died away, and Tara turned, smiling, to show that all was over.

I turned to the beauteous one beside me. "My world," I said, "and every living thing upon it died. They are all dead."

She nodded, a half-smile in her dark eyes. "They had no wealth, nothing I wished, and they were unable to defend themselves. They met the fate that must ever overtake the weak—destruction."

"Was it necessary to kill them because they had no wealth?" I went on, my voice rising with my mounting anger.

Those magnificent white shoulders shrugged slightly. "Ah, Prince Jan, need we discuss such matters?" she asked.

"Suppose one mightier than yourself—"

"There is none mightier than Tara. There can be none mightier. And even if there were, the Great Secret of the Bells would have her. No; with the warm rays of the Ball of Life upon her, Tara will go on and on throughout eternity—always the Beautiful, always the Glorious.

"But come, I will show you the history of other worlds; of the red star your ancestors knew as Mars, and the ringed planet that is no more, as well as many others whose pasts are both interesting and instructive."

And seated before the Magic Mirror with the Queen of the Stars beside me, I watched for hours while the histories of the different worlds were shown on that glittering screen. And all the while I sat there the soft, musical voice of Tara interpreted the various scenes for me.

A GOLDEN dawn was stealing across the sky when we finally rose.

"Come," said the royal beauty, and tak-

ing my hand she led me out on the lofty balcony, her delicate sleeping-robe fluttering in that early breeze.

Out here the world was awakening to a new day.

Far below us the blue waters shimmered and sparkled, while across the lake the first rays of the rising sun were falling on the great golden city with a dazzling brilliance that was blinding.

And standing beside me on the lofty balcony was Tara the Glorious, breath-takingly beautiful in that early light. For long the wondrous Queen of the Stars looked at her sparkling capital, with its mighty elevated thoroughfares that stretched on and on for miles, and its towering peaks and spires that seemed to brush the very sky; then at last she turned to me.

"Is it not wonderful, my great golden city?" she asked softly.

"It surpasses description," I admitted truthfully.

"You like it?" she asked, and as I nodded: "Then it is good," she went on. "It is very good, for I intend to have you remain here with me always."

"Have me remain here always!" I echoed, showing my surprise. "But why should you? How could my future be of any possible interest to your Majesty?"

The dark eyes of Tara went to mine. "Oh Jan, Jan!" she cried. "How can you be so blind? Has not my every word, my every look been an open invitation to you? Why do you think I allowed you to go unpunished when you were brought before my throne? Why have I always had two hidden archers waiting with ready arrows when you fought in the arena—ready to drive their shafts into the heart of your foe should he prove more than a match for you? Why have I allowed you to stay in this room where no man has ever trod, and talked to you through the long hours—and was happy? Why, Jan, why?"

She came closer, her breast rising and falling, her dark eyes wide, her magnificent body trembling.

"Because at last there has come to me one who knows not fear. Because at last there has come to me one to whom I would give my throne, my life, and myself. Because at last, after countless centuries of waiting, love wild and burning has come to Tara the Glorious!"

The next instant her white arms were drawing my face toward hers.

"Kiss me, Jan! Kiss and love me!" she panted, and those blood-red lips rose up to mine.

21. I Find Vonna

YES, I, Jan, Prince of the green planet, Earth, in the year 1,001,940, stood on that lofty balcony of the golden palace of Tara, which rose up in the center of the Blue Lake in the heart of the mighty golden city of Manator, on that distant world, Capara; while with her shapely white arms around my neck the glorious Queen of the Stars pleaded for my love.

But those red lips never found mine, nor had I time to make any response, for at that same instant, from across the lake, arose the harsh blare of a thousand trumpets that announced a new dawn and the last day of the Great Games; while from the far end of the room the huge doors were suddenly flung open as a score of slave-girls—the hand-maids of the Queen—entered the great suite to awaken, bathe and array their royal mistress.

Tara had stiffened as the blare of the trumpets reached us, though her arms still remained around my neck. Then as her hand-maids entered she turned to them, then back to me—the slave-girls staring at me in wide-eyed amazement.

"A new day, Jan—it has interrupted us," she whispered. "But there will be others, many others, and nothing will interrupt us—nor will any of the wishes you

may publicly ask me this day be denied," and her white hands slid down my arms to gently squeeze my wrists.

"My King to be!" she murmured; then turning to her slave-girls she issued rapid orders.

A few minutes later, at the orders of the Queen, I had been quartered in the great left wing of the palace—a huge suite of breath-taking magnificence that overlooked the Blue Lake. Here I bathed in a scented pool, ate of the rarest foods and donned the harness that was a solid mass of glittering diamonds which Tara had sent to me.

Then, at my own request, I was returned to my cell beneath the arena to await my coming battle with the Blue man. At the command of Tara three Black officers had accompanied me; but I could not help wondering how soon all this would change when the Moon of Madness began its wild plunge toward Capara. Tara, I knew, would instantly guess who had caused the catastrophe, and I had heard enough of the terrible tortures inflicted on those who displeased the Queen to know what a death I might expect.

Of course the love declaration of the Queen of the Stars had come as my greatest surprise, but it was a passion I could never reciprocate. I knew now that my heart lay in that far-off buried village on the weird Moon of Madness, where the body of the lovely golden girl lay cold in death.

An hour passed. From without came the din of the thousands pouring into the arena. I had kept the manner of my escape from the cell on the previous night a mystery, and of course my jailer had wisely maintained silence. Yet it was a keen source of mystery to the Black officers beside me, and at last I heard one say:

"The escape was amazing, the first as long as I can remember. And perhaps we never will know just how it was done, as the Earthman will not tell. Yes; it is a mystery as great as the secret of the Temple of the Bells," he turned, smilingly to me.

I had been paying little attention to the chattering trio, but at the last words of the Black I picked up my ears. "The secret of the Temple of the Bells." Only last night I had heard Tara use them. I had not delved into their meaning, though her tone, as well as that of the Black, told that it must be something momentous. Casually I turned to the officer beside me.

"This Secret of the Bells," I asked him. "What does it mean? I have heard it mentioned several times since coming to Capara."

"It would be strange if you did not," he answered with a laugh as the others nodded, "as it is Capara's greatest and most honorable defense.

"Ages ago," he explained, "many ages ago indeed, for our world was then young and war and conquest were unknown, our beauteous Queen sought only to protect her planet, and so ordered the great labor that took a million men a century as they dug the great shaft that penetrated down and down into the very heart of our world. And there, a thousand miles below the surface, was constructed a huge chamber that might well hold a small city.

"And in that chamber, at the Queen's commands, were put thousands upon thousands of tons of explosives of undreamed-of power, so constructed that they would last throughout eternity, and could be instantly discharged by the breaking of the delicate glass vial that sealed the huge doors of the chamber. A thin glass vial so delicate that it could be snapped asunder by a loud vibration and——"

"And that will ever save Capara from the heel of a conqueror," put in another, "for hung along that mighty thousand-mile shaft, at regular intervals, are ten great bells, each weighing many tons. When the first bell on the surface is rung, its

booming echo will vibrate along the silent corridor to the next bell, a hundred miles below, where the sound will snap the tiny glass vial above the second. This will release the force that will ring the second bell, whose sound in turn will continue along to the third.

"And so on and on till the ten bells have been rung, and their vibrations have reached the delicate vial that seals those distant doors, to break it with their loud din and cause the hideous explosion that will blast Capara to a hundred trillion atoms!"

"But better that than have our beloved planet fall before a conqueror," put in the first. "Though now we are so powerful there is no need to fear anything."

"But the Great Secret?" I asked.

"Where the great shaft begins," he answered. "Where hangs the first of the great bells. A tiny temple is said to be built above it—the Temple of the Bells—but as to its exact location only Tara knows, the glorious Queen and the four warriors who each year stand guard there."

"Could they not tell?"

"They are never given the chance, even if they would. Once each year the Queen sends four of her hardiest warriors to guard the temple, while those who served the previous year are publicly executed so that no loose tongue may tell the Great Secret. Nor does that stop the volunteers. To serve the Queen and guard the bells for one year, then meet public execution, is considered one of the greatest of all honors, and one for which all warriors strive."

"Suppose one did manage to ring the first bell?" I asked after a pause. "How long before the vibrations would ring down through the great shaft to the center of your world and explode Capara?"

"The matter of an hour," answered my informer. "The bells are a hundred miles apart, but the shaft is so constructed that it takes some six minutes for vibration to reach from bell to bell, making one hour in all. But that of course will never happen, for now we are the conquerors of ten thousand planets and——"

IT WAS the sudden entrance of two Black officials that stopped him, officials whose duty it was to escort me to the arena. I rose and followed them. "By royal command you are to fight directly before the throne of her Majesty," said one as we hurried along.

At the huge barred door leading to the arena we halted while that stout barrier was pushed aside. Here I was given a jeweled longsword; then, with the good wishes of the others in my ears, I stepped out onto the arena sands and into the dazzling sunlight, where half a million kill-crazed Blacks roared and shouted for blood.

Directly before me was the royal box of Tara, and beneath the waving fans of her slaves sat that wondrous beauty who ruled the stars. Her dark eyes were smiling upon me, one ivory hand half raised in greeting. At her feet sprawled the huge black lion that was her constant guard.

In the box to the left the grim Metak glared at me. Beside him sat the lovely Earthwoman who was his wife, while from the box to the right of the Queen, the tiny Vaxarus half rose from his chair, gesticulating with his eyes toward the seat of Tara. Vaguely I remembered his words of last night that said the captive princess he wished for his own would be there in golden fetters.

And then, unthinkingly, I raised my eyes to find her, raised my eyes to the slender figure that stood beside the Queen—to behold Vonna!

Yes; there, scarcely ten feet above me and leaning forward, her blue eyes wide and staring into mine, her scanty jewel-encrusted trappings glittering in the sunlight, her wrists imprisoned by the huge

fetters that encircled them, was the lovely golden-haired girl I could have sworn lay cold in death in the tiny buried world beneath the weird Moon of Madness at that very minute.

For an instant I stared in open-mouthed surprise, my mind numb with amazement. It was the quick look of warning from the blue eyes of Vonna that brought it back to rationality. Plainly there was something she feared I might or might not do; though whether it was to recognize her publicly before the others or not I could not tell. But the approach of the warrior who was my opponent prevented further speculation, and the next moment, amid the wild roars of the vast assembly, our blades crossed.

BUT whether the Blue man of Rana was a good swordsman or not I shall never know, for with the eyes of Vonna upon me I was no longer a man, but a veritable superman that nothing could withstand, and a moment later my sword had found his heart.

And then I wheeled again to the royal box, still unable to believe my eyes, to behold Vonna staring wildly at me, some frantic appeal in her eyes, while the glorious Tara arose and stepped forward till she was just above me. A short blare of trumpets brought an immediate silence; then the musical voice of the Queen of the Stars came to me.

"You, mighty warrior from a far-off world, have fought your way through the dangers of the Great Games. For ten days have we watched and thrilled at the strength of your sword-arm. And now I, Tara, Queen of the Stars, publicly proclaim you as the winner of the Great Games, and according to custom will grant you any three wishes you may desire. Ask, then, what you would of me."

And the beauteous one paused, smiling, to await my answer.

But all this must be unreal, I reasoned —some wild hallucination, perhaps. With my own eyes I had seen the mutilated body of the golden girl cold in death, and yet there she now stood beside the Queen, scarcely ten feet above me—the result of some dark act of necromancy, perhaps; but whatever it was, the princess of Penelope was before me, alive.

And I was to be allotted three wishes. Three wishes that I knew were a mockery, for but a few short days from now Capara was destined for that great catastrophe, and all upon it would know a terrible end. Of course at the time I touched the Ball of Life with the ring of Time I had not dreamed that Vonna still lived, and was a captive of the Queen. Had I known it, that very fact would have stayed my hand, for it doomed both captive and captor alike. But too late for that now.

And before me the beauteous Tara was awaiting my answer.

"Three wishes you have promised me, Queen Tara," I answered. "Three wishes that are the privilege of a survivor of the Great Games. Then I ask for the first one that mercy be granted," and I wheeled and gestured with my sword, "and that yon captive maids be allowed their freedom!" I cried.

A roar of protest arose from the surrounding thousands at my shouted words.

And just above me stood Tara the Glorious, a quizzical, half-frowning smile on those wonderful features. For a long moment she stood thus in silent surprise, and then, suddenly, as though conscious for the first time of the wild turmoil around her, wheeled and flashed a glare at her subjects as she raised an ivory hand. Five hundred thousand voices stopped as though suddenly turned to stone—an instantaneous silence that told of their awe, and the absolute rule of the fearless beauty they served.

Then slowly, as though choosing her

words with great care, there came her musical answer.

"Truly it is a strange request you ask of me, oh Prince. It robs us of a riotous spectacle, and I hardly expected you would demand it. Yet as Tara has given you her promise, that promise shall be kept, and you captive girls will be freed, and allowed to return, unmolested, to the planet from which they were taken.

"But come," and that beauteous face lighted, "you have still two more wishes. What would you ask of me for the second?"

"Something for which I have long waited, oh Queen," I answered, "and if my first wish robbed your subjects of a spectacle, the second should fully recompense for it, for I ask that I be allowed to meet, here and now in combat, the Commander of your fleets, and the man responsible for the death of my planet—Metak the Cruel, champion swordsman of Capara!"

Again a wild roar arose from the crowd, but this time it was one of joy, for it pitted their greatest swordsman against this rash fool who had challenged him. Hesitantly Tara gave her decision, though to do him justice, there was nothing backward or unwilling about Metak. With an agile leap he sprang completely over the railing, landing lightly in the arena, and advanced toward me drawing his longsword, with the loud cheers of his countrymen accompanying him.

Then, as was the custom when a battle between two distinguished swordsmen took place, a strong-voiced page stepped forward to acclaim us.

"BY THE royal sanction of Tara our champion meets this white man who has mowed down all before him. Once again Capara's greatest warrior will waive his rank to meet a captive in combat, as he has so many times, and always successfully, done in the past. And now," he wheeled to us, "by royal command I order the beginning of the duel of these two famed gladiators.

"Metak, our Commander!" And the thousands howled.

"And the others!" he cried. "Jan, Prince of the Bardonians, of the planet Earth!"

Above and just behind the ready Metak was the box in which sat his wife, the Earthwoman I have already mentioned. Often I had noticed her in my coming to and from the arena, and somehow I felt a strange attraction toward her—her mature, kind and lovely face, always sad and wistful—and could well imagine it was against her will that she sat there day after day. That she had guessed I was of her own world I could well believe, but never till now had my full identity been made known. She sat there calmly, expecting no doubt that another victim would soon be added to the long list of Metak.

Now it so happened that my gaze was toward her as the page cried my name. And then a strange thing occurred, for as she heard it she sprang to her feet screaming, an agonized horror on her face, to fall limply forward in a swoon.

And then the sword of my foe clashed against mine, and in an instant I knew why Metak was the champion of Capara.

Never in all my life have I known such swordsmanship. In a moment he had me entirely on the defense; then rushing me under a shower of cuts and thrusts almost too quick for the eye to follow, I was forced to give ground and back away, while the surrounding Blacks screamed for their champion and shouted for my death.

But despite that rain of steel upon me I was as yet untouched and far from beaten, although I had parried some of those wicked thrusts by only the scantiest of margins. But I fought coolly and swiftly; then suddenly stopping my retreat I lunged ahead with the swift thrust that

nearly got him, and halted his advance. This I followed up with another and another, and there we stood, each refusing to give an inch, fighting frantically as our blades clashed and slashed in that wild outburst of sword-play, the equal of which had never been witnessed upon that or any other planet.

I was fighting to avenge my world; Metak for his life and honor; and five minutes passed with nought to choose between our flying blades. But it must have come to the Black champion that he courted disaster in a long drawn-out battle, for I was not only much younger, but had a strength and endurance far superior even to his.

And knowing this he suddenly began again the rushing tactics that he had so nearly got me at the beginning of the fray.

But this time I was waiting and ready, and swaying slightly back as though a retreat was my intention, I lunged forward in the same movement with the lightning-like thrust that shot through his wonderful guard like an arrow, and drove my sword to the hilt in his breast.

Metak of Capara sank lifeless to the sands.

In the death-like hush that followed I turned again to the royal box as five hundred thousand pairs of eyes watched me; for the defeat of the hitherto unbeaten and supposedly invincible Metak had brought both silence and respect. Then looking straight into the dark eyes of the glorious Tara I spoke softly and slowly, and my gaze never left hers.

"And my third wish, oh Queen, I now ask of you—a wish that will cause neither bloodshed nor sorrow, and one that can easily be granted by your Majesty, for I ask for my freedom and the hand of——"

"Yes, yes, Prince; speak quickly; the wish shall be granted," and Tara leaned forward, eager, expectant.

"I ask for the hand of the captive beside you—Vonna, the Golden, Princess of Penelope!"

22. Dungeons of Despair

"A HUNDRED million deaths could not atone for what you have done! The destruction of ten thousand worlds is but a trifle in comparison! You have dared to spurn the love and hand of Tara for another, and for countless centuries and throughout eternity must your name and memory be cursed!"

So cried the beauteous Tara as her black eyes blazed with fury.

When I had made my request on the hot arena sands, the Queen of the Stars had gasped, gone white, then reeled as though struck by an unseen hand. Then she commanded her guards to seize me and I was beaten down beneath a hundred swords, and, fighting madly, bound hand and foot—hearing the screams of Vonna begging for my life as I was picked up, only half conscious, I was carried to the royal flyer which in turn conveyed me to the island castle of Tara. There I was carried to the great throne room, thrown on the jeweled floor before that mighty seat, then left alone.

For a long hour I lay there, wondering what I might expect and what had been done with Vonna. Then suddenly the hidden door I had discovered the previous night was rolled aside, and from it stepped that long-limbed beauty who was Tara the Glorious, to stride majestically toward me, her magnificent body like a shapely pearl, scantily hid by that tight-clinging gold-like tissue that fell from her waist to her instep, the diamond breast-plates blazing a barbaric splendor.

Standing above me she watched in silence, those wonderous black eyes flashing a wild fury.

"A mighty frame and powerful is Prince Jan," she spoke at last, "a body that rolls

with rippling muscles and arms swollen with sinew. And yet how soon my torturers can change all that, and reduce to a whimpering, bloody mass the fearless Bardonian swordsman."

I made no reply, had not even deigned to look upon her after that first glance of recognition. This seemed to infuriate more than a direct reply.

"Speak!" she cried. "Find your tongue, or by the stars I will have my torturers find it with the plucking-tongs! Quickly! Who is she? Who is that pale creature you prefer to Tara?"

"She is the woman I love," I answered from where I lay, my eyes meeting hers. "She is the woman I will always love, and nothing that you or anyone else can do will ever change it."

Tara screamed a wild, "Stop! Stop, or I will have you torn to shreds! Stop or else——"

Then with a little sobbing cry, half anger, half sorrow, the Queen of the Stars sank to her knees beside me.

"No, no, Jan, you cannot," she moaned as her white arms raised my head, and those wondrous eyes, wet with tears, stared into mine. "You must love no other but me. For countless ages I have awaited your coming, and the hour when I might surrender myself to you. Ten thousand worlds I endow you with, my lover. The golden city of Manator is yours for the asking. Tara herself will fall to her knees and obey you without question. But love me, Jan. Only love and want me—me alone!" she cried.

And then with a wild outburst of passion she strained me fiercely to her, and her hot lips rained a hundred kisses on my brow, my eyes, my cheeks and mouth.

"Love me Jan! Love me!"

With a shudder of disgust I wrenched my bound form from her. This was no longer the cold, brilliant Queen of the Stars, but a panting, love-crazed creature, wild-eyed and flushed, who seemed oblivious to all else but her desires. The sudden effort tore me from her grasp, and raised me to a sitting position.

"Jan of the Bardonians does not desire you," I answered.

There came a gasp from Tara, followed by a long moment's silence as she stared at me in wide-eyed amazement. It was as though astonishment had temporarily paralyzed her. Then a look of shame crept over those exquisite features, a red flush mounted her cheeks. Slowly it must have come to her that she, Queen of the Stars and ruler of destiny, had been scorned by a captive!

Then with a scream, half maniacal, half bestial, she sprang to her feet, her facial muscles working horribly, her hands clenched into white fists which she raised above her head.

"Die!" she screeched. "Die, cursed spawn of a million hells, and the pale one perishes with you! Die while I shriek with laughter as I watch you both writhe in your death agonies!"

Leaping toward the huge gong beside her, Tara the Glorious sent the golden hammer that hung above it crashing into its glittering side with a roar that threw open the great throneroom doors as a hundred ready guards came tearing to her aid.

"To the pits with this carrion!" she screamed as the furious guardsmen crowded around me. "To the pits! Take him to the deepest cell of the deepest dungeon, that he may not pollute my person with his gaze! Bind him with a score of chains and——"

"Queen Tara! Queen Tara! Oh, most Beauteous One—hear me!"

It was the loud shouting of a powerful voice that sounded even above the cries of the Queen. The next moment there came the sound of running footsteps. Then I was lifted to my feet by guards of Tara,

to behold the tall and dignified old Black who came running, and stopped sharply before her, panting.

"What means this intrusion, Kovan?" screamed Tara, wheeling toward him. "Has the royal astronomer gone mad, that he would dare come before me like this, unheralded? By your ancestors there had better be a good cause for such an act if you would keep your eyes!"

THE royal astronomer, who had been struggling for breath, broke out again:

"Oh glorious Queen, but hear me!" he cried. "But listen to the loyal Kovan as he tells that most terrible news. For the age-old prophecy is at hand at last, your Majesty, and the tiny Moon of Madness has begun a wild plunge toward Capara."

"What!"

"Yes, yes, oh Beauteous One!" sobbed the royal astronomer. "Yes, yes, it is true! Through the great glass I have just now seen it! The Moon of Madness is being drawn toward Capara as though by supernatural means, and within ten days will crash upon and destroy our world!"

Tara the Glorious went white.

I doubt during that moment if any of the assembly so much as breathed. Of course the Queen must have instantly realized who had brought all this about, but she remained in a long and terrible silence, her white body tensed like some magnificent statue, and when last she did speak, her voice was so low as to be almost inaudible.

"Remove the prisoner to the dungeons. I will deal with him later."

Held in the hands of four stalwart Blacks, I was hustled down a seemingly endless corridor that finally terminated at the entrance of a subterranean passage. Here waited another Black with a bunch of keys protruding from his belt.

As we drew nearer the tall man smiled, and grabbing a lighted torch from its niche and motioning us to follow, led the way down a vast series of time-worn steps. We made our slow way ever farther into the earth. A cold dampness arose to tell us of our great distance below the surface.

At last we halted before a sturdy wooden door, held by massive iron bars upon the side of our approach. Stopping only to unlock and push it aside, we entered the long, low-ceilinged vault that was destined to be my prison.

It was a foul-smelling pit whose jagged ceiling was damp with moisture, and whose floor was a hard, black clay. Huge rings were set in the stone walls. To these were fastened heavy chains, and at the far end of several of the chains the attached forms of whitened skeletons lay gruesomely about. Near by, with his back toward us, lay a shackled prisoner, evidently in sleep.

One of the skeletons the Blacks kicked aside. Then the huge padlock was opened, and the chain that had so recently held the bones of one long dead was clasped around my own ankle, after which the Blacks left, taking the light with them, and I was alone in the deep dungeons of the castle of Tara with the dried bones of dead men for my companions.

For an hour silence reigned, then from the blackness came a sudden gasp and an intake of breath, followed by the sounds of a moving body which informed me that the sleeper I had seen on entering the dungeon had awakened. A moment passed; then evidently he either sensed my presence or heard my breathing, for he called softly in a voice that was tantalizingly familiar.

"Who is there?" he asked shrilly.

"An Earthman," I answered softly. "Jan of the Bardonians. But who are you who speaks from the darkness and——" But before I could go further there came a high scream of joy and a wild flow of words that rang through the gloom.

"Prince Jan! Prince Jan—it is I! It

is I!" cried the voice. "Abel—Abel who loves you!" And there came a series of thudding sounds I knew to be that of the poor fellow who was jumping up and down in his excitement and joy. Then the clanking of chains told me he was straining as far as possible toward me.

So this was Abel—frail, timid, faithful Abel, the bird-man, who had so worshiped my physical powers and in esteem held me away above all others. I believe that now he was almost glad to be here, for to be near and to serve me was ever his greatest joy. It was some minutes before his wild babbling would permit sane speech.

"But about yourself, Abel," I was asking presently. "How in the name of sanity is it that I find you here, and only a few hours ago saw Vonna in the royal box of the Queen, when with my own eyes I beheld her mangled form in Shebak's cave?"

"But it could not have been her, Prince Jan," he answered. "You see," he explained, "I was in the village with the princess while you and the others battled with the wolves on the plain before the cave. At last one of the warriors, wounded and exhausted, entered the cave for a respite. He said you had been carried off by the Vampire-Women, that the battle was lost, and that in a few minutes the wolves would come tearing down the shaft into the village.

So, knowing this, I picked up the princess in my arms and flew up the shaft to the outside. Once there I rose up into the heavens and made for the ship that had brought us to the Moon of Madness. It was my plan to secrete the princess Vonna there while I went in search of you. But we never reached it, for just as I topped the peaks of the valley and was descending, a giant space-ship suddenly zoomed down from the sky. Its side door was flung open and we were drawn into it. It was one of the fleet of the Black Raiders looking for us. Then we were brought to Capara and the castle of the Queen, and I was sent to this dungeon where I have been ever since. I do not know what has become of the princess Vonna."

"But Vonna," I put in. "I saw her dead with my own eyes. The features were mangled beyond recognition, but I could make out the golden hair and the slender head-band with the long red feather around her head."

"Ah, Prince Jan, I think I can explain," answered Abel after a pause. "Just before we fled from the village several young girls clung around the princess and me, screaming with fright, for the terrible din of the battle above reached us plainly. One of the girls was tall and had golden hair. In an effort to soothe and console her, the princess Vonna removed and gave her the head-band. It must, therefore, have been that girl you saw dead."

This then accounted for what I had seen in the village of Shebak. The girl had not been Vonna. Vonna had been saved—but where was she now? Had the vengeance of Tara been turned upon her? I feared it. I had not seen her since I had been dragged from the arena, though I had heard her screams as she struggled to aid me, and could now, in imagination, picture her writhing under some terrible torture. With a groan I buried my head in my arms.

TWELVE hours passed. During that time, as we spoke in low tones, I had told the bird-man of the coming disaster that would soon destroy Capara, but my companion did not seem to mind. Evidently Abel figured that so long as he was beside me no harm could befall him.

Then suddenly footsteps sounded, the door was pushed open, and with two

plates in one hand and a torch in the other, the tall, evil-faced Black who was our jailer entered that dreary vault, his thin lips curled in a sneer at our helplessness.

"Still here?" he jeered, standing just above us as his torch crackled and spluttered. "Yes, I thought so. I figured that it would take more than your great thews, Earthman, to escape from the pits of Tara."

"Perhaps we are just as well off here as elsewhere," I answered. "Nine more days and every living thing on this world shall die. It will take more than the brilliance of your Queen to keep the Moon of Madness from crashing into Capara."

The Black gave a roar of laughter.

"That's what you think, you dull-witted fool," he taunted. "Oh, yes, we all know now that it was you who brought it around, and if you were to as much as show your nose in Manator you would be torn to shreds. But don't think for a minute that the coming crash will harm either the Queen or a single one of her subjects."

He threw the plates, clattering, to our feet.

"If you could but see the frantic construction that is going on in the world overhead, as, by the royal command of Tara, the people work madly day and night to build the needed ships. None sleep, and all the fleets have been recalled, for at dawn on the seventh day from now the golden space-ship of the Queen will rise into the air, followed by a million others, each containing the ten thousand souls that together will number the entire ten billion that is the populace of Capara."

He stepped back a pace, regarding me mockingly.

And where do you think our beauteous Queen is taking her people for this great migration? I could give you a hundred guesses, no doubt, and you would not be right in one of them. Well, I will tell you, rogue that you are, for it can help nor harm. It is to your own planet the Earth. Yes, the green star is where we are going, for the gasses that destroyed it have now long lifted and it will be safe. And we will take our great treasures with us, and colonize the Earth with a splendor that will outshine even the wonders of Capara. Yes, seven days from now we will all leave, and be a two-days' journey out in the void before the Moon of Madness strikes our world."

At the door the jailer paused for a final taunt.

"So, my would-be clever Earthman," he jeered, "as you eat your swill you will have time to reflect upon your own dismal failure, and the ultimate triumph of our brilliant and glorious Queen."

Then he went out, closing the door behind him.

Six days passed—that is six days as I could best reckon time in that dreary vault of inky blackness. At intervals the jailer would come with food and drink. It was then that I would hear of the frantic building of the space-ships, and the haste and hurry of the outside world as they made ready for the great migration. Several times I asked what had been the fate of Vonna, but as my answer was always the same—a mocking laugh—I at last desisted.

I will not attempt to pen my feelings. Not only were the Black Raiders going to escape from the coming catastrophe, but they were going to migrate to my own world as well. That was the bitterest blow of all. As for Abel and myself, I felt that we would be left to perish in the chains that held us, once the Blacks had departed from their homeland.

And then late on the sixth night footsteps sounded, the dungeon door was thrown open, and followed by two guards whose lighted torches flamed and flickered, Tara the Glorious entered that dreary vault and was standing before me,

wrapped in a long black cloak from neck to instep, tall and graceful, her face white and wondrous in the torchlight, the tiny diamonds sprinkled in her wavy black hair glittering like numerous water drops.

THE Queen of the Stars wasted no time in greeting.

"Stay where you are," the words snapped out like a whip as I made a motion to rise to my feet. "Remain there wallowing in the filth as behoves you, for in the years to come you will know much of such misery—blinded!"

No love or kindness was evident now. Immobile as a mask of pearl were her exquisite features. Only those dark eyes seemed alive as they flashed like angry meteors.

"Yes, I am taking you with me in my own space-ship to the planet Earth, that you may be the ridicule of my court as you grope your way through the years as my captive, with the red collar of shame around your throat.

"Tomorrow night then my torturers will come to slay the bird-man and to blind you. But before your eyes are lost to you forever there is one sight you must see—the marriage of the pale creature you love to the hideous black dwarf, Vaxarus. I myself shall perform the ceremony, and will arrange for you to see it. Then you are to be immediately blinded, so as to carry always in your memory the vision of your beloved being given to the arms of another."

At the doorway she paused.

"So resign yourself to the inevitable, Earthman. When next you hear footsteps it will announce my torturers coming to blind you!"

The hours passed slowly—five, ten, then twenty, while Abel and I lay in the dungeons of Tara, waiting for the death and torture to come. Above us we knew the hurrying billions worked frantically for the great migration to the green star, but down here all was the stillness of the tomb, and as hour followed hour we began to believe that that great migration had already begun and we were alone on Capara. Then suddenly light footsteps sounded, the door was again pushed back, and a slender feminine figure entered.

I recognized her at once. She was the Earthwoman who had so strangely attracted me when I fought in the arena, the wife of the man I had recently killed —Metak. But in the name of sanity what could she be doing here?

She was quite alone, and she held a torch in her right hand. For a moment she stood still, peering fearfully into the silent gloom before her, and the traces of a once great beauty were still evident in her matured and dignified loveliness. Then her eyes suddenly fell upon me where I lay, besmeared with grime and staring at her. A gasp escaped her lips as our eyes met; then with a little sobbing cry she ran toward me, dropping the torch and sinking to her knees as she threw her arms around me and cried out the last words I ever expected to hear.

"Jan!" she cried. "My little baby! Oh, it is I, darling, it is I—your mother!"

23. The Temple of the Bells

"MY little boy, my dear little boy," sobbed my lovely mother, her eyes wide with love and alarm, her white hands brushing the grime from my hair and wounds, for the bruises from my struggle with the guards had been many. "Oh, what have they done to you—what have they done to you?" she wailed.

"Ah, but thank the Gods I have found you," she went on. "Even now I cannot believe it. It seems too good for one who for twenty-three long years, night after night, could but look at the distant green star and think of the husband and the lit-

tle son lost to her there, when the Raiders came and stole me from your father's side and brought me to Capara, where the Queen forced me into the loveless marriage with Metak."

I cannot clearly remember what I said or did, other than for the first time in my life my eyes knew tears and speech was difficult as I felt again the love of those two arms that had so long been lost to me, and the sweet voice I had not heard since my cradle days.

Minutes passed, lost to us in the great joy of our reunion, but presently the thoughts of her own danger came to me.

"But Mother, you must not stay here," I said suddenly, realizing her peril. "I do not know how you possibly found me, but if you were ever discovered——"

My mother kissed me again with a happy smile. "What could they possibly do that would hurt me after the joy of finding my son? No, my boy, I do not fear them, or anything they could do now.

"But come, my son, you must escape, as we have much before us," and she reached for the small pouch at her waist. "In two hours it will be dawn and the great golden space-ship of Tara will rise into the void, followed by a million others, to begin the great migration to the Earth before the Moon of Madness falls upon Capara. It is you and I who will stop them, my son. It is you and I who will avenge your father and prevent them from ever bringing death and destruction to any world again."

"We still stop them!" I echoed. "But how, Mother?"

"By blowing Capara to a hundred trillion atoms before the space-ships have risen and put off for the Earth. By making use of the great secret I learned long ago from Metak, when one night in drunken bragadoccio he told how he had learned from an ancient parchment the secret that was supposed to be known to none but Tara herself—where stands the tiny Temple of the Bells."

As she spoke I had been hurriedly unlocking the padlocks that held my chains with the key she had produced. Freed, I turned to release Abel.

"Hurry, my son," went on my mother. "I only learned of your whereabouts by heavy bribery, and at any moment we may be discovered by the guards. My space-ship lies now in the courtyard, beside the Queen's great golden flyer. We must reach it and make for Skull Mountain, a wild, towering peak, the highest on Capara; some two thousand miles directly to the north of us. It is on the top of this peak where stands the Temple of the Bells.

"Haste then, my son, for in their frantic excitement as they prepare for the great migration they will be blind to our departure, and at this moment Queen Tara is engaged in the throneroom in some ceremony. We should have ample time to start the ringing of the first bell, then get well out into the void before Capara is blown asunder. Once in space we will make for our own world, Jan, for my ship is well provisioned and—oh!"

It was the frightened cry of my mother that caused me to wheel and learn its cause from where I knelt, freeing Abel from his shackles, to behold the huge Black jailer leaping upon me with uplifted dagger, his black features distorted with rage. Behind him I caught a glimpse of a second. Their entrance had been quite noiseless, and I was doomed, despite the fact I was free of my chains, for I would be unable to rise and defend myself before that descending knife had plunged into my flesh.

It all happened in five seconds—five terrible, terrible seconds. I made a mad effort to scramble to my feet—the burly guard leaped forward, his long knife shot toward me—and then with a little cry my

dear mother sprang between us, and her lovely white bosom received the keen blade meant for my own heart.

I KILLED the guards. Yes, with my naked hands I snapped the neck of the first, and seizing the wrist of the second stabbed him with his own dagger, all in a minute or so. Oh, vengeance was swift, to be sure, and in my wild rage I was a veritable maniac that nothing could withstand but it could not save my lovely mother, who perished in my arms with a little sigh as she gasped my father's name.

Time passed. It might have been an instant, it might have been an age that I knelt there, with the slender form of my mother in my arms, my mind numb with sorrow. But at last I became conscious that Abel was shaking my shoulder and his shrill voice was in my ear.

"Please hear me, Prince Jan—please hear me," he was saying. "We must get out of here at once if we are to do what your mother planned. In an hour it will be dawn and the fleets will depart. Please do not stay here longer, Prince Jan. We have much to do."

I looked up at him. "Yes, Abel," I answered dully, "I will come—we have much to do."

Presently we were making a silent ascent up the great winding stairs to the world above, armed with the longswords and shortswords of the two guards I had killed, while behind us in the silent pits, my brave mother lay in that last terrible sleep from which there is no awakening.

Vaguely I recall Abel leading me up numerous long flights of stairs, and down seemingly endless corridors, several times pushing me into a side room while footsteps hurried past us, till at last we came out upon a little balcony to behold the great throneroom of Tara sixty feet below us. Yet everything was quite a blur up till then, but suddenly I became cool and collected as the meaning of the ceremony taking place below became intelligible to me.

Though it was not yet dawn, that mighty room was brilliantly lighted. A hundred or more guards and nobles were assembled there, crowded around the great throne in its center. And upon that huge bejeweled seat sat Tara the Glorious, her golden wand extended above the heads of the two who knelt before her—Vonna and Vaxarus the dwarf. The hands of the golden girl had been tied behind her back, and a burly guard held her to her knees; but even from the lofty balcony I could see the struggling of her slender form as she fought against what they would do to her.

I quickly realized the meaning of it all. Vonna was being forced to marry the hideous little dwarf. Another moment and the wand of Tara would touch the head of both of them to conclude the ceremony. Another moment and she would belong to Vaxarus forever. There was but one chance, and with the quickness of thought I took it.

In a flash I wheeled to the bird-man, and whispered a score of words in his ear. Abel paled, but the loyal fellow never failed me. In an instant I was on his back, my right hand holding my gleaming longsword, my left hand free and ready. The next the bird-man had leaped lightly over the small railing before us, and with me securely straddling him shot down toward the assembly below with the speed of an arrow.

Straight toward the kneeling Vonna Abel winged at terrific speed, and then at that very last instant swerved and rose up slightly. But in passing, my left arm swung the slender princess up beside me, while my right sent my keen longsword whirring in a vicious slash. Then as the head of Vaxarus tumbled from his shoulders to the floor, and the astonished as-

sembly gasped in open-mouthed horror, the great wings of the bird-man churned the air loudly, as with Vonna and me clinging to him he rose slowly above the heads of the others, and toward a tiny balcony at the far end of the room.

From below came a roar of voices as the others found their tongues, but it did not stop the struggling Abel in his slow, upward flight, and a moment later we were standing on a frail little balcony near the lofty ceiling, that led to a narrow passage and a tiny porch without.

Toward this we hurried. Sixty feet below us I could hear the silvery voice of Tara screaming for our capture, and the wild patter of footsteps hurrying to obey her. But for a few minutes at least we were safe, and the lofty gallery we came out upon showed the great courtyard below, unguarded, for most of the warriors and guards were either in the throne-room or elsewhere. And there, golden and gigantic, lay the great space-ship of Tara, and beside it was the smaller one that my mother had mentioned was her own.

Down to the doors of the latter I ordered Abel to fly us, then with two strokes of my shortsword cut the bonds of Vonna and motioned them both within.

"Hurry!" I cried, for there came a sound of running footsteps and the shouting of excited voices. "Hurry—we must get the ship aloft before they are upon us!"

And indeed there was cause for haste, for suddenly on all sides a wave of Black guards appeared from nowhere, running toward us and shouting. But we were well within the ship and had slammed shut its heavy doors before they were upon us, and the next moment we were rising above their heads and shooting northward, while our erstwhile captors howled and gesticulated below.

How we managed to get the ship aloft will ever remain a mystery, but desperation can bring around many seeming impossibilities, and with Abel beside me, instructing me in the use of the various gears and devices—his many years of captivity among the Blacks had familiarized the bird-man with their usage—the great space-ship rose as lightly as if a seasoned pilot guided her course.

"Now on!" I cried. "On to the Temple of the Bells! Our one hope is to blow Capara asunder before the Blacks put off for my world, if we would cause their doom and avenge ten thousand planets!"

"But carefully, Prince Jan," cautioned Abel, moving the speed control a single notch. "We must stay at our slowest speed if we are to see and recognize Skull Mountain, for this is a space-ship and possesses terrific velocity. Even now we are traveling with the speed of an arrow."

And indeed we were. All around us the sky was lighted by the coming dawn. Through the lookout window we could see the many great cities just below us, intermingled with vast stretches of plains and sparkling rivers. The huge square of every metropolis was crowded with space-ships, and we could see the thousands of black dots hurrying into them. All over that great planet, in every city and village, the ships were making ready to take off, waiting only for the rising of the great golden ship of their Queen to announce the signal for their departure.

And in the space-ship of my mother I hurried toward Skull Mountain, to prevent their departure and to destroy them. As we shot along I told Vonna my plans.

PRESENTLY a towering, gigantic mountain showed directly ahead, and a moment later we were able to distinguish the tiny temple on its top. Just beside it we descended lightly; then cautioning Vonna and Abel to remain within I drew my two swords, flung back the heavy door

and sprang into the open in almost frantic haste, for I feared that even now I might be too late.

It was indeed a tiny temple that stood upon that mighty mountain top, the highest mountain top on that great world. A tiny little temple which was scarcely more than a weirdly roofed structure, open on all sides, hung above an enormous black bell which stood on a stone platform. Just behind it was the beginning of the great shaft that legend said led down through the mountain and into the very heart of Capara, and the huge stores of high explosives hidden there.

On all four sides of that mighty mountaintop—a tiny flat top, but a hundred yards square—the earth fell away to the distant plains thousands of feet below.

But stretches around a tiny campfire directly before that gigantic bell was that which was of more immediate interest to me—four Black warriors, the guardians of the Bells!

Even as I appeared in the doorway of the ship one of them raised his head and saw me; and then as I dashed toward them he sprang up with the loud shouts that brought the others to their feet, drawing their weapons. But I was upon the first before he could fully unsheathe his own two blades, and my longsword found his heart even as he drew them. Then as the first rays of the rising sun shot up to tear the sky with flame, the weapons of the other three clashed against my own.

The warriors who guarded the Temple of the Bells had not been chosen at random. Each was a renowned fighter whose swordsmanship and bravery had made him eligible for that high office. But with such a wild fury, and so great a cause to fight for, in that supreme hour I was a veritable superman nothing could withstand. Steadily they were forced back as I drew ever nearer to the great bell.

On we fought. Our keen blades glittered, clashed and crossed. Of course the guards realized my intentions and screamed frantic orders to each other, but they were unable to stop me, or do other than give ground. Another moment and I would be beside the bell, and release the iron catch above it that would cause the booming roar which would shoot down the great shaft to the second bell, a hundred miles below.

Triumph seemed within my grasp—and then by some cruel fate a lucky sweep of a warrior's blade sent my shortsword flying from my hand!

There came an exclamation of joy from the warriors. The trio ceased to retreat, then with shouts of triumph leaped forward, heartened by my misfortune and fighting like fiends. Six blades now fought against my one, as flitting like a silvery serpent my longsword caught or parried each savage slash and thrust. But not for long could I hold against that veritable rain of steel. Then a lightning-like thrust grazed my side. I was forced to give two paces; and the next instant with a shrill cry Abel dashed past me, and sought to beat one of my foes to the earth with a flurry of his great wings.

Poor, brave little bird-man, ready to die for me whom he loved! It was a noble but futile act. The brute before him but laughed at his efforts as he ran him through with his shortsword, then threw his dying, quivering body heavily to the ground.

A shout escaped me, a hoarse shout almost maniacal as I sprang forward, crazed with grief and anger. With one sweep of my sword I disarmed him of his weapons. Then lashing out in that wild, superhuman stroke, which caught the Black squarely in the center of his head, my blade slashed on through skull and trunk, and tore to the very middle of his body.

With cries of terror the others gave way before me, leaping backward. That little

retreat was all I needed. In an instant I had sprung forward, releasing the iron catch and hearing the mighty roar of the bell that spelled Capara's doom. And the next instant I raised my eyes to behold the sight which announced my own. For coming swiftly out of the dawn in the east was the great golden space-ship of Tara the Glorious!

But I had no time either to watch its advance or flee from it, for the two guards had recovered from their panic and were leaping forward to attack. Once more our blades clashed. Vonna screamed for me to flee and pointed to the approaching ship. But the two before me fought bravely, and when at last I did dispatch one, the great ship had landed and its huge front door was swinging open, to discharge, as I supposed, a thousand warriors.

But no wild rush of armed soldiery came tearing through that portal, no shouting Blacks hurrying forward to aid the one I fought. No; it was a tall and long-limbed beauty who strode majestically through the open doorway, and she was quite alone—a glorious, black-haired Queen who had known ages before the dawning, and those wondrous dark eyes, wide and flashing, took in the situation at a glance, sweeping around that flat, lofty mountaintop, then returning to me again.

I was still engaged with the guard before me, but it was evident Tara realized that not for long could the Black withstand me. Already he was streaming blood from several serious wounds, and though fighting madly was being steadily forced back to the lofty peak's stone edge. Another moment and he would either be forced over it, or fall before my sword. And then the gaze of Tara fell upon the golden girl.

A wild joy leaped to that wonderful face, and running toward the slender Vonna she forced her to her knees, whipping out a long dagger and holding it above her heart, at the same instant my longsword pierced the body of my foe. And then I sprang forward to aid the princess of Penelope, but the wild scream of Tara stopped me in my tracks.

"Back!" she cried, her black eyes blazing, her left hand holding the struggling Vonna with the ease one might a child—her shapely right hand raised and holding the long, jeweled dagger. "Back before my blade is buried in the body of this pale creature!"

I halted—there was nothing else I could do—for there was a wild light in those flashing eyes that was almost maniacal, and another step might send her long knife plunging downward.

"Oh, I knew I would find you here," she went on with a terrible calmness. "I knew it from the moment they told me they found the body of Metak's wife—your mother—in the dungeons. So she did know the secret then—where stood the Temple of the Bells. I often suspected at much.

"But she perished just the same, and so shall this pale one you love!" cried Tara. "For all your fighting ability, and for all you have accomplished, it will not save this woman, or make less terrible my vengeance on those whose doom I seek. Behold—she dies!"

And with a high wild scream, she drove her knife toward the breast of the kneeling, helpless Vonna!

But that long knife never touched the flesh of the golden girl, nor was the vengeance of Tara realized. Even as she spoke, I had become conscious of the moving form behind her—Abel the Tor, bleeding, dying, but yet alive. Slowly, painfully he was sneaking up behind the unsuspecting Queen. It was that which helped to hold me, as I hoped my presence would distract Tara from his advance.

And so it was that even as the sharp

knife began its plunge downward, Abel seized her wrist and held it. Then mustering the last of his waning strength, the bird-man spread his great wings and rose slowly upward, his single white garment dripping blood, and the struggling, screaming Tara held firmly in his grasp.

Higher, higher into the blue the flapping bird-man mounted, as fighting madly the frantic Queen sought to release herself.

And there we stood at the very edge of the mighty mountaintop, Vonna and I, staring like two wide-eyed statues at that weird, nightmarish scene—the shrieking Queen, the great depths below, the loud and dismal flapping of the bird-man's massive wings. Even now I cannot recall it without a wild thrill shooting through me.

A hundred feet above our heads and out over the great void, Abel suddenly released his victim, as a gasp of horror escaped both Vonna and me. And then, screaming wildly, twisting and turning over and over, the white body of Tara the Glorious shot downward, just missing the edge of the jagged peak, to go falling, falling to the terrible depths, thousands of feet below. A high and silvery drawn-out scream stabbed up to us in a blood-chilling echo.

But she did not fall alone, however. Hardly had the beauteous Queen of the Stars plunged past to her destruction, before a shudder shook Abel's slender form. His great wings suddenly faltered and fell, as the last of his strength waned from him. And then in a terrible silence the limp form of the bird-man dropped in the wake of his screaming victim to the awful depths below.

24. Back to Earth

VONNA was sobbing wildly, hysterically, when I reached her side.

"Come!" I cried raising her to her feet. "Come quickly—we have not a moment to lose!" For out from the great shaft behind the temple had suddenly roared a metallic thunder that announced the echo of the second bell, a hundred miles below.

"In fifty minutes this planet will be blown to atoms, and if we are not far out in space by then, we shall perish with the rest!"

Together we hurried into the golden space-ship of Tara. It was well fueled, well provisioned, much faster than the other and just as easily piloted. I turned to its glittering controls, remembering the words of Abel which advised of their use. Once more luck was with us, and presently the huge flyer, well able to hold ten thousand in its mighty interior, was rising into the void, at first comparatively slowly but gradually increasing as Capara dropped away; then once beyond the pull of gravity and out into space I set the guiding needle toward the planet Earth, and pulling back the speed control to its final notch, I sent the great golden space-ship shooting toward my distant world with the speed of a falling star.

Through the lookout glass of the pilot room we could see mighty Capara fall away, vast cities, seas and plains growing smaller with each moment. And then its continents, appearing as massive black outlines on its huge expanse which covered half the heavens; then a third, then a fourth. And through that thick lookout glass we could also see the Moon of Madness, now but twenty thousand miles from Capara and swiftly coming closer. In two more days it should strike the mother planet in the hideous crash that would mean the destruction of both worlds, but long before that Capara would be no more.

"But Jan," Vonna asked as the great ship tore along, "will not the inhabitants of Capara follow in their space-ships and escape the explosion the same as we? They were supposed to leave at dawn."

"But not till Tara leads them," I answered, with hands on the control gear and looking through the glass before me. "The great migration was to begin with the rising of ten thousand ships from the golden city of Manator. Then from all parts of Capara and its other great cities the ships of the others would fall in line behind. But this huge ship of Tara's was supposed to lead them, and at this moment, back at her capital, her officers and generals are awaiting her return."

Moments passed, tense, anxious moments, as we drew swiftly away from Capara. Our terrific velocity shot us wildly along. Of course it would take some hundred and fifty long days during which we must remain within the ship as the golden flyer tore through the cold wastes of outer space. But I felt I had avenged my own world, and my eyes were fixed on Capara, for in a few minutes should occur the great explosion which meant the end of that planet.

And then there came that sudden scream from Vonna which broke upon my thoughts and wheeled me in my tracks. The eyes of the golden girl were staring into the room behind us, wide with horror and fear. In a twinkling my gaze followed hers to behold the reason.

The pilot room in which we stood was a tiny one, compared to the other rooms of the great ship. A small and open frail door was all that separated us from the next, an enormous chamber. In the center of that chamber a long passage led on and on through the other rooms, to the far end of the ship. And walking slowly up the passage toward us was the huge beast I had seen several times before—Ranga, the great black lion that was the pet and guard of Tara!

In a flash I realized our helplessness. My own longsword I had dropped when assisting Vonna to her feet. The golden girl, of course, was unarmed, and any weapons that might be in the ship were in the rooms beyond the lion. The great beast had already seen us, and its green eyes were gleaming wickedly. For a moment it stood watching us intently, lashing its black sides with an agile tail. Then that tail suddenly extended to its full length, quivering as though from excitement. The huge mouth opened to reveal long, white, cruel teeth.

And then with a deafening roar that echoed through the space-ship in a fearsome bellow, it charged straight down the passage and upon us with the speed of an arrow.

But at the same instant I sprang past the frail door and locked that little barrier behind me, temporarily protecting the girl. Then, weaponless, I wheeled to meet the charge of the huge beast, just as the great black lion rose upon its hind legs to grapple with me.

AS THE great cat reared up, its ears were glued against its head, and its green eyes glittered hate. It snarled and its foul breath shot into my face in nauseating waves. Then the great mouth flew wide to seize me, but it was instantly halted and blocked, as with an instinct quicker than any brain, I drove my right fist straight into its slavering jaws.

The next instant the huge teeth snapped shut upon my forearm like a trap, and we both went crashing to the floor.

Over we rolled, once, twice, then stopped with me on top. In a flash the mighty paws smashed against my naked side—for I wore only a loin-cloth and sandals—as it sought to rake my body with its claws. But luckily the attendants at Tara's court had kept those same claws well-trimmed and dulled, lest by some mishap they might scratch their royal mistress. And so, though they did manage to tear and lacerate me badly, I knew that for a time at least they could not kill.

My fist and arm still occupied the mighty jaws of the brute, gave it something to chew on. I knew that at all costs I must keep them there, despite the excruciating agony. Slowly I forced my fist farther and farther down that slimy throat.

But could I keep it there? At the onset I had blocked the huge jaws, but the torture was hideous.

The hind-quarters of the beast were thrashing wildly beneath me, and despite the trimmed and dulled claws they were still terrible weapons, for they ripped savage stroke after stroke that laid the flesh of my thighs, hips and sides open to the bone. Then as one hind claw sank deep into my thigh, and caught there for a second against the bone, I pinned the leg beneath me with a quick turn of my knee. The other paw still tore and gashed, but a few moments later I was able to pin it also.

Meanwhile the hideous growls never ceased for an instant, nor the black bulk its wild thrashing.

Everything within me cried out for relief from the terrible torture. But even then, from the depths of me, a stronger will asserted itself—the subconscious will to live. At first my defense had been that of a doomed and cornered creature: self-preservation. But now the fires of fury and hope of victory were rising steadily within me. I was no longer fighting to save my life. I was Jan of the Bardonians, defending my mate and destroying an enemy—a hideous, hideous enemy!

The lion coughed and gasped. I redoubled my efforts, stifling my screams with teeth that bit through bleeding lips. And then there came that last horrible crunching sound, a final, frantic heave from me, and the right front limb of the black lion snapped in my strong grasp, broken!

How much longer I could keep up that terrible struggle I did not know, but I began to be aware of a growing advantage. My efforts were telling. I knew by the lion's growing distress as it strangled and contorted its body in paroxysms of torture. Its hind-quarters lashed and lashed; its chest rolled beneath me. And then it choked again, and its breath came in harsh gasps of agony as it strove madly to disgorge the hand that stifled it.

Those green eyes that once flamed such a wild hatred were now dim and popping. The roars and snarls had died away to a horrible gasping sound. The tongue flopped out sidewise between its jaws as if paralyzed. And then as I saw it was weakening I shouted a loud, half-crazed laugh of joy, and pressed the offensive fiercely.

I raised my body up and beat it down again and again on the lion's gaunt torso. I raised a knee and hammered it down into the chest and vitals of the beast with all my strength, and heard the flesh and ribs give way. "I'll get you!" I snarled into that savage face. "I'll get you!"

More than a moment of this. To me it seemed an hour. And then with a final convulsive shudder, the body of the great black lion straightened out and went limp. The jaws relaxed slowly. The beast was dead!

And yet for several minutes I clung there, fighting against the descending blackness, before I dared loosen my hold on the four corners of the brute and slowly draw forth my mangled hand. It was a sickening sight, red, ragged, shapeless, and almost without feeling, for the nerves had been mutilated. Even if I could save it, it would be of little use to me henceforth, I knew.

Weakly I rolled off the black body and got to my feet. I made my way toward the little door. It swam before me, but I somehow managed to unlock and push it open, then sink to my knees on the floor of the tiny pilot room beyond.

I have a faint memory of Vonna running to my side and striving frantically to

ease me. Of her dear voice in my ear crying again and again that she loved me. Then my dimming gaze went through the lookout window to the giant planet, Capara, now a hundred thousand miles away. And even as I watched, a gigantic cloud of flame and smoke shot up in its very center, tearing it asunder. And when the void had cleared again, the world of the Black Raiders was no more!

Then the black clouds rolled forward to claim me, and I lunged unconscious to the floor of the pilot room.

IT WAS months later that we landed upon my own world, the green planet, Earth.

During that great journey it was the tender and tireless care of Vonna that slowly nursed me back to life and health. While that mighty ship shot on and on through the endless wastes of space, we came to realize that we had been meant only for each other, despite the fact our respective worlds were many millions of miles apart. And during the slow passing of the many, many hours, it was the golden girl who taught me to read and write, and so made this narrative possible.

And then one dusk that journey ended, and the great space-ship came to rest at last upon the Earth that was my home. But I did not possess sufficient skill to land the huge ship lightly, and though Vonna and I were both unhurt, its great bow crumpled with the force of the impact, and rendered it useless for further flight.

It was a wild and desolate spot upon which we landed, thousands of miles from my homeland, and near the edge of a mighty canyon—a colossal abyss that fell away for thousands of feet, and of such enormous size that the eye could not see its farthest side. Miles away and dimly in the north was the beginning of a dreary moss-covered waste that had once been the bottom of a great ocean. A cold, autumnal wind told of the oncoming winter.

That night while a million stars gleamed coldly overhead, Vonna and I stood on the rocky brink of the great canyon talking in low tones. Behind us lay the golden space-ship which had brought us across the great void—now crumpled and useless for further flight, but still a home and haven, and streaming a flood of light from its open doorway.

And we were alone! The only man, the only woman upon the planet, Earth! I said as much to Vonna, said it in a tired, lifeless tone.

"But we can begin it anew, my Jan," answered Vonna softly. "Can start this world all over again, just you and I."

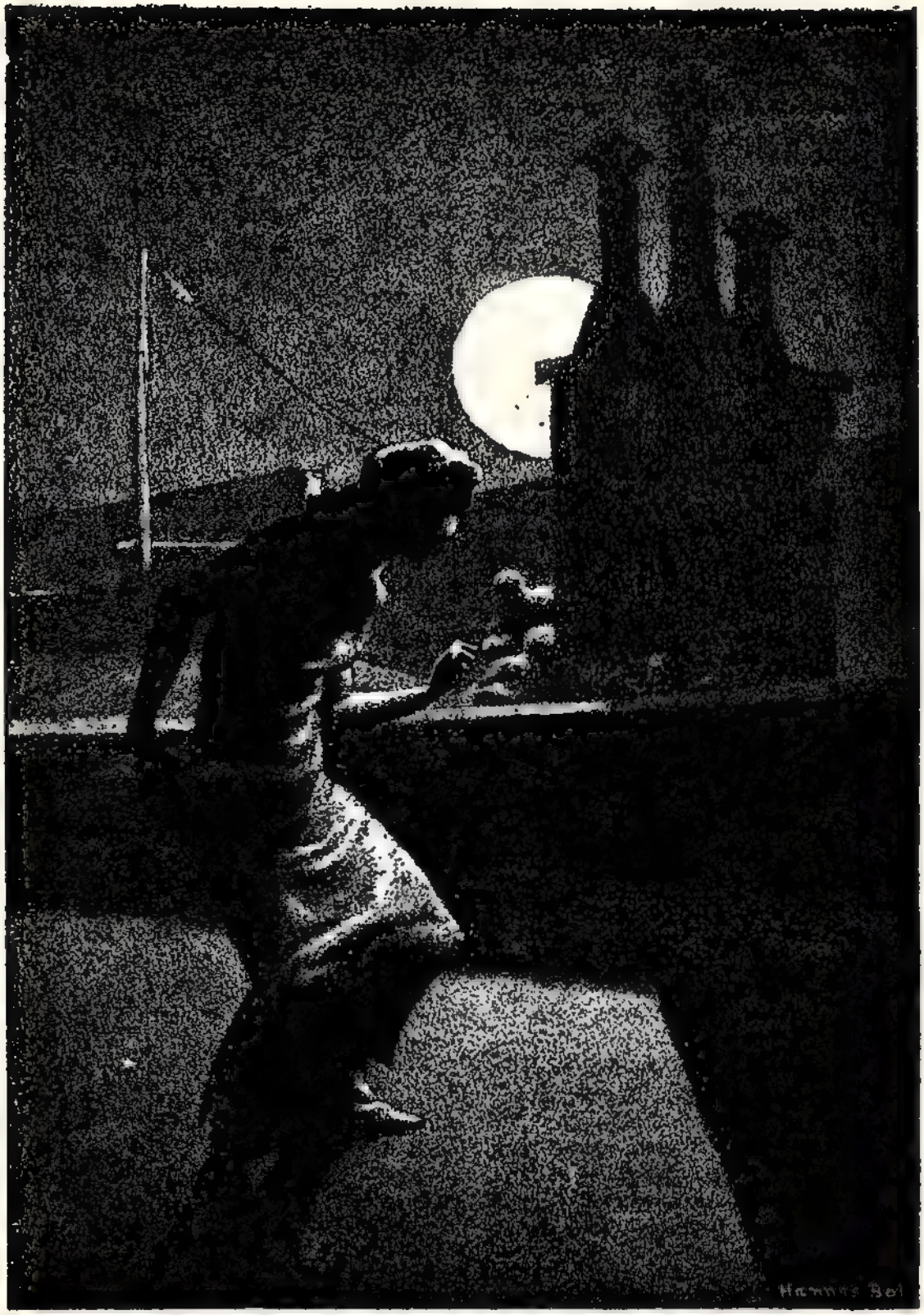
"Begin all over again, remake the world, you and I?" I gave a tired shrug, my right arm hanging limp and useless at my side.

"Yes, yes, beloved," she went on eagerly, her beautiful face glowing with earnestness. "We can start again like the first pair in the dim and distant dawning. We have our strength, our hopes, our love. The ship is well provisioned, and we can stay in it during the coming winter. And then in the spring when the snows have gone and the world returns to sunshine, we can begin preparing for a home"—her voice dropped low, and faltered—"and perhaps for the beginning of a new race, Jan, with you and me as its parents.

I turned to find the golden girl looking eagerly at me, her lovely face lit with that wonderful light that needs no interpretation. And my arms went out and around her and I nodded my assent. And then our lips met in that long, long kiss that made us one forever.

Far out in the mighty void a single star shot across the heavens—falling—falling—falling!

[THE END]



"They were after her, too, because they imagined she was his mistress."

On Pell Street

By FRANK OWEN

Chinatown keeps to the old lanes—by the author of "The Purple Sea" and "The Wind That Tramps the World"

SAM WONG was in a particularly morose state that night because his beloved canary, Li Po, named after the most illustrious of Chinese poets, had died that morning. One last sweet song, then death. Li Po had trilled an anthem to the sun. He had died from excess emotion, from excess of beauty. Anyway that is how Sam Wong diagnosed his passing. His grief was extreme.

The fondness of Chinese for birds is traditional. In China it is no uncommon sight to see a rich man walking along the street, carrying a canary in a cage, taking the little songster out for a walk to enjoy the sunset. Sam Wong had always regretted that the custom of Manhattan precluded his walking about the streets with Li Po. To be sure there was nothing to prevent him doing so. But it would direct attention to him and he did not at that particular stage of his nefarious career care to be the target for the eyes of men. Better to be a shadow, for a shadow is indestructible, with nothing to dread or fear.

Now as he walked along the Bowery he beheld a thin wisp of a girl standing before a window. Her face was like old ivory, colorless. Her hair was burnished copper, and in her large dark eyes were all the sorrows of the world. Sam Wong sighed.

He was an ardent worshipper of all beautiful things. He noticed that her hands were clenched so tightly, the nails of the fingers were white. Softly he glided over to her side.

"May I be forgiven for addressing you?" he whispered. "I do so at the risk of arousing your wrath. But I am only Sam Wong, a Chinese, with much money and yet poor, for tonight I am lonely. Accept my friendship until the moon rises. When one is sad, the moon, too, weeps. In its sympathy it is dependable. I wonder if you are hungry."

"Very hungry," she admitted. "All my life I've been hungry for something beyond my fingertips."

"Perhaps it is hunger of the heart."

While they talked, Sam Wong had led the way across the street and around the corner to an Oriental restaurant, the dim lights of which were soothing to the nerves.

"What do you wish?" he asked.

"Anything will do," she said listlessly.

"You are right," he agreed, "all effort is as useless as summer dust."

She sighed. "It is so quiet and peaceful."

"Don't talk," said he. "Rest. Forget that I am with you. Here is the tea. In Chinese restaurants they do not wait for one to order the liquor that does not intoxicate."

He filled a small cup, and placed it before her. Then he spoke in subdued tones to the waiter, ordering chicken-mushroom soup, chow mein, roast young pork and a variety of almonds and condiment delicacies.

Then once more he turned to the girl. "Your name?"

"Just Barby."

"Barby," he repeated slowly. "It is a pretty name."

Barby breathed deeply of the sweet aroma of the tea, fragrance of jasmine blossoms.

Sam Wong sipped his tea and looked at her through half-closed eyes. Had she been a written picture, he could not have been more absorbed in her. A strangely beautiful girl with a face of ivory pallor. No painted lady. No common girl of the streets.

He longed to know her history but he asked no question. He was infinitely patient and he waited.

Not till the soup had been placed before them did Barby speak again. Then after she had tasted it, she said, "Gee, but this is good. I don't know how long it is since I've tasted food. Funny that the body goes on living after the soul is dead."

Sam Wong looked up quickly. She had disturbed his tranquillity. The bitterness in her tone was astounding.

"Not true," he said bluntly. "Your soul is not dead. I see it shining from your eyes, fine and white and beautiful. The past doesn't matter. It is a sun gone down. But of the present, I wish to speak. The hours that have not happened belong to you. Tell me where will you sleep tonight?"

"Does it matter?"

"To me, infinitely."

"Why?"

"I am a lover of jewels and jade. I am swayed by perfect sonnets. Although I was born in San Francisco and have never been in China, the Yellow River flows through my blood. I have fallen under the spell of your eyes, the spell of their dark brooding mystery. There is far too little beauty in this world for any of it to be destroyed. And you are beautiful."

She closed her eyes and struggled to choke back a sob. Last night she had belonged to Bat Matson; the night before an unknown man had beaten her in a Third Avenue hall bedroom.

"I am homeless," she murmured.

"I will take you back with me to my house," he said. "My rooms are near by, on Pell Street. The flat is large and fairly comfortable, large enough so I need not get in your way. There no one will disturb you, for I discourage visitors. In Chinatown I am a man of mystery. It is right therefore that I should shelter a girl of mystery. Be assured that I am actuated by honorable motives. Sam Wong is but a humble merchant, a merchant who deals in beauty, a merchant of dreams. How then can I stand idly by while beauty is destroyed?"

"All right," she said wearily. "I will trust you, and why not? I have trusted everybody else, and I have nowhere to go."

THE meal was finished in silence. Thanks to the gentle care of Sam Wong she ate heartily. Her young body yearned for food. And now she could scarcely keep her eyes open.

Sam Wong paid the check. He led the way from the restaurant. As they turned into Chinatown, he held her arm lightly. Through the narrow twisting adventurous streets they walked, streets about which more fabulous tales have been written than any other section of New York, perhaps of all the world. Few of them are true. The most interesting and sinister have never been written. Colorful stores displaying a vast variety of gewgaws, nicknacks, ivories, jades and raw fish. Joss houses. The Chinese theatre. A Catholic priest walking slowly along apparently lost in thought. No one bothering them, no one paying the least attention to their doings, and yet Barby felt as though countless eyes were following them, watching their every move. Strange smells, strange sounds, laughter, weird music. A child

crying. Chinatown, a vast rug wafted on the winds from the Orient to be cast down in the heart of the city. One of the most congested spots in all New York and one of the cleanest. No littered dirty streets, no piles of filth, not much dust. Immaculate cleanliness as though great brooms in the hands of genii had swept it clean.

Sam Wong led the way up two flights of winding stairs in a building on Pell Street. There was no light in the halls and he lighted a cigarette to show her the way.

"Be not afraid," said he. "The halls are in darkness because I believe that he who must walk through narrow places should be protected by shadows."

"I am not afraid," said Barby.

And now he unlocked a door and pressed an electric button. The next moment a glare of light shattered the blackness and Barby followed him into a room of such sheer beauty it might have belonged to a Mandarin when the Manchus were at their peak of glory. Here was wealth inestimable. Rich carpets and tapestries, priceless porcelains, teakwood tables and finely carved cabinets in one of which reposed a hundred species of jewels, some rough, uncut, some that glowed eerily in the lantern light. Here were comfortable chairs, embroidered screens, written pictures, carved statues in jade, nephrite, agate and carnelian.

"The apartment has sundry rooms," said Sam Wong. "Consider yourself mistress of it. I sleep in a small room in the front. I suggest that you make your personal apartment in the rooms at the back."

Barby slipped into a chair. She knew that Sam Wong was trustworthy. He had no designs upon her person. To meet such a man was somewhat of a novelty.

Impulsively she turned to him. "I cannot understand," she said, "why you should be interested in my welfare."

"Have I not told you? It is my belief that no beautiful thing should be allowed to perish. One of earth's extreme tragedies is that flowers ever must fade. So much time is devoted to an effort to banish crime from the world, when to purge the world of sin it would only be necessary to banish ugliness. When I beheld you I was entranced. Even the stars must tremble to behold you. If flowers can know jealousy, they must be stirred when you pass. Then, too, for years I have had a canary. His name was Li Po. He was a sweet singer. He sang pæans to the dawn. He died as he had lived, worshipping beauty. And I was very lonesome when Li Po was gone. Something precious had been snatched from my life. In extreme melancholia I walked along the Bowery. Then my eyes beheld you. Beauty had been snatched from my life in the vanished songs of Li Po. Now beauty had come back again with the approach of an ivory girl. I am your slave for as long as you choose to share my dwelling. When you are gone my life will be eternally devastated. I make no effort to hold you. You are free, though I hope for a while at least you will remain to make up to me for the loss of my little comrade. You are perhaps unacquainted with grief; if so you cannot appreciate my anguish."

She placed her hand upon his arm. "I had a baby," she said. "A few weeks ago my boy died and nobody cared. Had you who worship beauty been near my room that night on Third Avenue he might be still alive. After all, perhaps it is better. How could he succeed with everything against him? I know how you must grieve over Li Po."

THE days flowed along like poetry, never distinct, never quite real. Stuff of dreams, dust of moonrise, breath of roses. Nothing beautiful is ever real.

Barby was being wooed back to health by silence, complete tranquillity. No music

is as majestic as silence, absolute silence. Each morning Sam Wong slipped from the house before she had awakened. He never came near her room. He never touched her body. Not even a kiss did he seek. But he wooed her in a thousand subtle ways. And when her face began to take on some semblance of color he was glad.

Barby never left the apartment even when Sam Wong was away. She was afraid of the streets, the filthy noisy streets and the evil faces of men. Sam Wong brought her beautiful garments fit for a Manchu princess. She always wore them in the rooms, saving her single dress for such time as it would be necessary for her to return to the streets.

During those days she slept much, without trepidation, without fear. She never locked the door of her room. She had faith in Sam Wong. He was a genial philosopher. He never tried to force his favors upon her. One may bow down in worship before a goddess, but one should not presume beyond obeisance. Perhaps Sam Wong was foolish in his attitude. Certainly he was not a moralist, for his stock in trade destroyed the souls of men.

They never went out to dinner. All meals were sent in from near-by restaurants. Every conceivable luxury graced their table.

Barby was glad Sam Wong never urged her to appear upon the streets with him, although she was surprised that he did not. How was she to know that a hundred men constantly waited an opportunity to kill him? The police, too, were constantly on his trail. His increasing influence was resented in high places. The streets were not conducive to health. It was not his wish to parade his ivory girl in the face of danger. Better to keep her hidden away from baleful eyes.

At times he read Chinese love poems to her that thrilled her immeasurably. He chanted the verses in a softly modulated voice. It was a new strange country to Barby. She closed her eyes and listened. She scarcely breathed, so intent she was. It was restful. It soothed her nerves. Sometimes for hours they sat thus as Sam Wong read to her from his countless volumes of Far Eastern lore.

One night he entered the apartment breathlessly as though he had run a long distance. His usual calm mien was ruffled. His hands worked nervously.

"Quick, follow me!" he cried hoarsely. "There is not a moment to lose." He opened a secret door in a wall panel, disclosing a black passageway. Into this he crept and dragged Barby after him. The panel swung shut again, leaving them in impenetrable blackness.

"Be not afraid, Ivory Girl," he murmured, "but enemies are pursuing me and if we fell into their hands the consequences might be dreadful. I was a fool to subject you to disaster. But you will be quite safe if you follow my instructions."

While he had been speaking they had been creeping up a winding stair. Presently they emerged on the roof-tops. It was strange to be slinking along like shadows under the pale moon's glare. The sounds of the street drifted to their ears, laughter, harsh noises, the wail of a motor siren, the bark of a dog.

SAM WONG sped from roof to roof. Nimbly Barby ran along beside him. At last they darted into a doorway.

"Go down these stairs," he said, "and you will be free. Get away from Chinatown as soon as you can. I haven't a moment to loiter. Perhaps some day we will meet again and I can recite more lyrics to you."

The next moment he was gone. It was almost as though he had vanished into the air. It was an eery night, weird and creepy. The moon caused the chimneys

to stand out in grotesque silhouette. A train on the Third Avenue "el" went grinding by. And now she imagined she could make out the forms of figures creeping along the rooftops. They were after Sam Wong. They were after her, too, because they imagined she was his mistress. In terror she turned and sped down the stairs.

The halls were dimly lighted. They too seemed to be seething with wraiths and shadows. Once a malevolent face loomed up before her and two gnarled bony hands clutched at her like talons. But she evaded them and continued down the stairs. She breathed a sigh of relief as she reached the street. But even now she dreaded to look behind her. Hurriedly crossing the street she turned neither to right nor left and so it was that she did not notice the large beer truck that was bearing down upon her. As she went down, the truckman clamped on the brakes and a woman screamed. But Barby felt no pain, she even smiled, for miraculously Sam Wong was bending over her.

"Come, Ivory Girl," he said gently. "We will go back to my rooms where we can find quietude."

"But is there no danger?" she asked.

"Not now," said he, and her wonderment grew.

So hand in hand they walked back to Sam Wong's apartment on Pell Street. But now the stairs did not seem dark as they mounted. There was a pale blue glow as though a lantern had been lighted.

As Sam Wong pushed open the door of the apartment, Li Po greeted them with a song so beautiful it seemed as though the city had paused and stood on tiptoe to listen.

Barby placed her hand on Sam Wong's arm. "But I thought Li Po was dead," she whispered.

Sam Wong smiled reassuringly. "Not dead," he said softly, "living. Now we are all—living."

Ears of the Dead

By JAMES ARTHUR

Speak not above a whisper, lest the dead
Wake to avenge themselves; and say no word
Of anything which may bring down the dread
Curse on us like a hawk upon a bird.
Silence is fitting here—the dead have ears
That never sleep; they wreak their dark designs
Without restraint, nor do they brandish spears
Fashioned from ore of any earthly mines.

I know their wrath, for I have seen their flight
Through the dark labyrinths of murky night
To visit whom they hate, and I have heard
The hissing of their cauldrons as they stirred
The blood of men in a most loathsome broth,
And hell-fire sputtering the dripping froth.

"A troop of phantoms in knightly armour, skull faces grinning from their helmets."

The Gentle Werewolf

By SEABURY QUINN

A remarkably gentle creature—that werewolf. But she was a lady And the lady was in love.

SPRING had come to Galilee and summer was not far behind. Already the plain of Jordan was showing brown and bare, a desert of dun sand and dust with here and there a patch of wiry goat-grass, but in the foothills of the Lebanons the fresh soft verdure washed the slopes with a green tide that broke into a froth of blossoms on the flat crests of the knolls. Southward, in Cairo the Magnificent, the Sultan Baibas plotted war, but the citizens of Acre paid small heed to warnings brought by spies and friendly Arabs. Since Saint Louis and his hard-fight-

ing blades sailed for France in 1245 they had lived in constant peril of the Paynim; yet their basalt walls had broken wave on wave of Moslem soldiery—and it was spring. Why worry over rumored wars when the soft breeze played among the branches of the orchards, the soil smelt sweet and warm and the larks and linnets piped their minstrelsy in every coppice?

The men-at-arms on watch at the Gate of Saint George waved friendly greetings to the little company of youths and maidens who clattered through the tunneled entrance and out into the sunlight burnishing the high road to Tiberius. Six of them there were, two noble squires and the young knight Gaussin de Solliès, and with them three maids of the highest blood of Outremer.*

They rode without attendants, for the Peace of Jerusalem still held and they had no fear of Paynim raiders, and this was Beyond-the-Sea, not France, and chaperonage was an institution strange to them. Like their cousins overseas they were, yet strangely unlike, for while in France and England maids toiled at the broidering-frame and youths rode forth on raids or hunted in the forests where the sun was cold, and few of them could form the letters of his name, these children weaned in Palestine were born to luxury and reared in ease. Their Western manners warmed and softened by long contact with the East, they had escaped the thrall of crudity, abysmal ignorance and uncleanliness of Europe's mediæval thousand years without a bath. Unguents spiced with scents from Cathay and Persia were theirs; the Arabs' vapor bath was part of their routine; once a week at least skilled masseurs came to tend them; not less than once a month a eunuch barber or deft woman shaved their

* Lands held by the Crusaders.

All night he lay sleepless.

And inside his broken, empty heart, echoed a cry: "Sylvanette."

bodies till they were as free of surplus hair as those of newborn infants.

A dozen peoples served them: merchants from Damascus and Baghdad brought them cloths the like of which were seldom seen in Europe; scores of dark-eyed Syrians were at their instant call; courteous Arabs and sleek Greeks had taught them prosody, philosophy and rhetoric. They spoke—and read and wrote—French, Arabic, Latin and Greek with easy interchangeability.

As they mounted the first range of foothills young Gaussin touched the gold-bossed bridle of his saddlemate. "Wilt tarry beneath the trees with me a while, Sylv'ette?" he asked. "There is somewhat I would say to thee."

The girl looked at him, smiling, and drew her Arab pacer's rein. A moment later, as their friends rode down into the farther valley, they walked their horses to the grove of flowering almond trees and Gaussin leaped down from his saddle to take the girl's slim foot in his hand and assist her to dismount.

Since Adam first looked into Eve's eyes there has been no woman in creation who could not tell when she was about to receive the offer of a man's devotion, and the telegraph of Eros warned Sylvanette de Gavaret. A flush as delicate as the almond blossoms overhead spread up her throat, across her cheeks and on her high, white brow. She looked at him, eyes wide, lips parted; she was breathing faster as he took her hand, slipped off the pearl-sewn gauntlet, and kissed her fingers.

No chevalier's kiss this, no mere salute of gallantry, but homage, worship utter and complete as that of worshipper before a shrine.

"Sylv'ette ma drue!" he paraphrased the Arthurian romance, *"Sylv'ette ma mie, en vous ma mort, en vous ma vie!* (Sylvette my little bird, Sylvette my dear, in you my death, in you my life)."

Her eyes were soft with love and trust as she laid her other hand upon his crisply curling auburn hair and capped the verse in a voice scarcely louder than a fluttering breath:

"Bel ami, ainsi, va de nous!
Ne vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!
Fair love, let us together be,
Not thou sans me, nor I sans thee!"

He looked up, wondering incredulity in his eyes. "Lovest thou me, then, Sylv'ette?"

"With all the heart of me, my Gaussin."

Time and life are one, eternity is different, immeasurable; and eternity, though but an instant clipped from time's relentless dial, was theirs as they exchanged their first kiss. He drew her to him slowly, unbelievingly, and the utterness of her sweet self-surrender was almost terrifying as she leant against him, lips apart, and offered him a kiss that shook him to the final cell and fiber of his being. She groaned softly, as in pain, went flaccid in his arms, then tightened her arms round his shoulders, pulling his face down to hers, pressing against him until he felt the flutter of her heart as it beat echoes to the pounding of his pulses.

AFTERWHILES they sat beneath the almond trees on a net of spangled shade, the coiling fronds of the new grasses cool against their hands. The delicate odor of the almond blossoms came to them, and the warm scent of fern-grass. Beneath its overtone of pink, with the verdure of the sward below, and the bright blue of anemones to punctuate it, the orchard might have been a fragment of the Magic Carpet of the Arab story-tellers, torn off and drifted here to light among the foothills of the Lebanons.

At noon they rose to their knees and, hands joined piously, recited the sweet salutation of the angel to the Blessed Mother while the bells of half a hundred

churches, and the chapels of the Templars and the Hospitalers and the covents of the nuns and friars rang the angelus. Afterward they broke their fast with pasties of spiced meat and comfits washed down with Cyprian wine, and washed their hands in a small brook that clattered over pebbles round and smooth as doves' eggs. Then she must lave her white feet in the brooklet, and he must be her tiring-woman and her body-servant and dry them on the linen of his mantle, and claim a kiss from both her insteps for the service, and a mailed and bearded knight from the Hospital, as he rode by on his high black charger, smiled at them as he heard their laughter, then wiped a tear-drop from his eye. But he could not tell if he wept for them because they were so young and inexperienced, or for himself, because he had neither youth nor illusions left.

At last the soft blue dusk of early evening settled in the valleys. They rose, and while he put the harness on the horses she watched him with love-brightened eyes. A lovely creature, this Sylvanette de Gavaret. Just turned sixteen, and lissome as a willow withe, she made each movement with a sort of lilting, questing eagerness. There was lyric loveliness in every motion of her long and supple body, in the undulation of her narrow hips, the rondure of her high firm breasts. An Arab ancestress had willed her the black hair that in some lights seemed to have an iridescence like a blackbird's throat and the great dark eyes, soft and appealing as a gazelle's, with something hesitant in their velvet depths. But the long, slim lines of her, the fair white skin through which a delicate tracery of blue veins showed and to which no sun, however ardent, could bring a touch of tan, were heritages of pure Norman blood. Brought up in Outremer, child of the mingled customs of the East and West, she dyed the almond-shaped nails of her hands and feet bright red with henna and emphasized the depth and power of her great dark eyes by shadowing their lace-veined lids with kohl.

The shimmer of her silken tunic was like the pale bloom of her skin, something that belonged to her, and no one else, and the dark amethysts of her ear-rings, like the amaranthine jewels of her necklace and the great carved amethystine signet on her forefinger, seemed to echo the soft somberness that hid the inward glow of her fringed, plumbless eyes.

She shuddered slightly, as if stricken with a sudden chill as he led up the bridled Arab barbs. "Art cold, my sweetling?" he asked with a lover's solicitude.

"Nay, love of mine," she answered with a smile that brought the hidden fires of her deep eyes to sudden glowing. "'Tis that I hate to say farewell to this dear spot. Would that we might be like this alway, have this one day frozen into an eternity."

He laughed and kissed her as he swung her to the saddle. "'Tis but the dawning of our day of love, *yah Shadjar ad Darr*—O Pearl-Spray"—he used the Arabic love-term as naturally as if he had been born beneath the shadow of the Crescent. "As good Queen Balkis said to Solomon the Great, 'The half hath not been told thee.'"

He broke into a snatch of song as they rode down the highway and dipped into the purple-shadowed valley: the romance of Bisclavret penned by Marie de France for the pleasuring of English Henry:

"Bisclavret a nun en Bretan
Garulf l'apelent li Norman . . ."

"The Bretons call it Bisclavret,
In Normandy they say Garulf, in England
werewolf . . ."

"Ah, no, my love, sing not that frightening ditty, I entreat thee!" Sylvanette signed herself fearfully and looked about her with a shudder. "The werewolf is a devil-creature to affright the hardiest, and we are far from home—"

"O thou sweet small coward," he laughed teasingly, "art thou truly frighted of the werewolf while I ride thus beside thee?"

"Nay," she answered with an echoing smile, "not truly. But the *bisclavret* affrights me sore. In all the host of Pandemonium there is no monster like unto the werewolf, methinks. By'r Lakin, I chill from heart to skin at very mention of its name! I cannot bide a wolf-pelt nigh me, since it reminds me of the hateful *loup-garou* [werewolf]."

THEY trotted through the vaulted portal of the tower-gate under echoing walls that picked up the sound of their horses' hooves and hurled them back with thunderous volume, and came into the street beyond. In the evening cool the city was astir. Beneath striped canopies of sailcloth, Syrian merchants spread their stocks of rugs from Mosul, glass from Damascus, linen sewn with pearls from far Baghdad, jeweled saddle-cloths from Shamakha, carpets from Bokhara vivid as a hasheesh-eater's dream.

Upon the Square stood the Cathedral, first a church and then a mosque and now again a church, staunch with the trinity of its great oaken doors and Gothic strength, vivid with the glow of sanctus light and candle, calm now, and quiet, as if it dreamt of peace amid a world still echoing with the clash of arms and battle-cries and shuddering under rumors of new wars.

Here she bade him leave her, for he must report at the citadel before the evening angelus had rung, and afterward he must bespeak her father for her hand, while she would fain kneel at the altar of the good Saint Anne and ask her intervention when the landless knight besought the heiress of de Gavaret for wife.

He looked back with a wave as she went up the steps, and she turned to him, white hands held out in farewell, eyes upraised and very wide. A sudden gust of evening breeze pressed her silk robe against her body, defining it as though it were a statue suddenly released from the rough marble, and she raised her hands and pressed them to her breast and leant herself toward him. With lips apart and eyes tight closed, she leaned toward him, then turned and made her way with slow steps through the shadowy ravine of the great door. At the threshold she stopped for a moment, wound her scarf of tabby silk turbanwise about her head, then tiptoed to the niche in the north transept where the altar of the blessed Anne of Bethlehem was set.

The evening shadows had grown deeper when she emerged from the great church. Little feathers of dusk were drifting through the streets; a sort of brassy, unreal twilight filled the air. She tossed a groat to the small half-caste boy who held her horse, swung the barb around so she might mount the saddle from the horse-block at the curb, but paused with foot upraised as a little scream of almost human agony came to her. She looked about. Nowhere, either in the Square or in the streets debouching on it was there any sign of life. Then the scream came again, and she looked into the shadow cast by a buttress of the cathedral wall and saw a filthy, ragged figure squatting.

Bridle looped in elbow, she approached the crouching form. It was a woman, brown of face and wrinkled as a frosted apple. Her cloak was patched and quilted with a dozen different-colored scraps of rag, and round her neck and on her filthy, scrawny hands were ornaments of tarnished metal. Between her knees she held a writhing, quivering jackdaw at which she mouthed with toothless gums.

"What saith my lord the Count, thou imp of Satan?" she demanded. "Did not I send thee to his tower to overhear his counsel with the Master of the Templars? Tell me that which passed between them,

or by Barran-Sathanas I'll pluck thee bare as any pigeon ready for the pastry-cook!"

"Let be!" Sylvanette commanded very sharply. "How darest thou, in the very shadow of God's house—"

Her brave words slackened, faltered, for the old crone raised her wrinkle-puckered face and looked at her with fixed, set, staring eyes, void of expression as if they were set in a corpse's face. Yet in the dark they seemed somehow to glow with inward phosphorescence, like the pale light given off by long-dead things that rot in swamps and quagmires.

"And who are thou to give directions to thy betters, wench?" the crone demanded. "Pass on, or feel the vengeance of La Crainte—"

"Wench?" Fury drove all fear from Sylvanette. "Thou darest call me wench, thou foul harpy?" She brought her riding-whip down on the rag-patched shoulders of the crouching hag. "That for thy insolence! Unloose yon poor bird instantly, or—"

Once more her voice failed, for the old woman was addressing her in a low, squeaky whisper: "How long wilt thou continue in the form of woman, wretched creature?" She rose, drew a flask from her girdle and from it poured a little liquor in the palm of her cupped hand. "Take the form I give thee"—she hurled the liquid into Sylvanette's face—"and retain it till" —she rose and brought her withered, wrinkled lips against Sylvanette's ear, whispered something in a tittering, malicious breath, then slapped the girl on both cheeks with her open hand.

THE liquor the old hag had thrown in her face stung like vitriol, scalding Sylvanette on brow and cheek and chin. The fire of it seemed spreading through her veins until she felt as if she were bound to the stake with blazing faggots heaped about her. The world was spinning crazily on a loose axis; time stopped, and breathing with it. She was gasping, choking, dying. She dropped upon her knees, then to her hands. The scarf wound round her head fell uncoiled to the pavement; her gown and shoes and gauntlets hung and flapped about her. An itching, tingling and unendurable as nettle-stings, spread over her entire body. Her eyes stung so she could not wink without sharp, stabbing pains in them. She raised a hand to soothe her smarting lids. . . . O, mercy, heaven! No hand, this, but a broad furry paw, long-nailed and terrible —a wolf's foot!

She screamed in horror and dismay. *"Woo-hoo-oo-oo-hoo!"* Deep-throated, rising in a slow crescendo, then sinking from a howl to wail, and from a wail to a low moan, the ululation of a wolf's bay sounded eerily, and from every kennel in the city came an answering chorus, yelps, growls, barks of dogs which answered the long howl with fear or fury.

"Begone!" The witch spurned her. "Go seek thy kind, and"—a high, cruel, cackling laugh—"remember how thou mayest find release!"

Panic seized her. Home! She must get home, see the good Père Botron, have this foul witchery taken off with bell and book and holy water. With long, swift, silent leaps she raced along the darkling street, but somehow the quick summer darkness which had settled on the city seemed less dense. The horologe had struck the sunset hour long since, lights were glowing in the windows of the houses, here and there a cresset burned against a wall; but the darkness seemed no more than a deep twilight as she loped with long, swift, space-devouring leaps toward the Château Gavaret.

She was almost at the portal now. At the gate stood Guilhen, sergeant of the watch, leaning on his partizan, gazing with indifferent eyes at a cat that stalked imag

inary mice in the shadows. She made toward him as to a shelter in a tempest. "Guilhen, old fellow, it is I!" she attempted to cry, but:

"Woo-hoo-oo-oo-hoo!" a wolf's howl split the gathering darkness.

"Saint Mary's mercy on all sinners!" Guilhen almost let fall his partizan at sight of the great beast that rushed toward him. Almost, but not quite. In a moment he had gathered back his wits and aimed a devastating blow at the brute. "Wolf or demon, natural creature or *bisclavret*, have at thee!" he shouted. Then, to the guard within the château: "Ho, there, a wolf runs in the streets! Bring bows to shoot it down!"

"Guilhen, Guilhen, 'tis I, the Lady Sylvanette ensorcelled by foul witchcraft!" the wretched girl screamed, but only horrid growls and marrow-chilling howls came from her mouth.

Now a twanging like a plucked harp-string sounded, and an arrow clipped against the pavement by her feet, and a quarrel from a crossbow struck fire from the paving-stones behind her.

She turned and ran for dear life, for the guard was turning out, and the arrows screamed and whistled past her ears like hornets when their nest is disturbed.

Through the streets she ran, the clicking of her nails against the paving-flints in time with the wild beating of her heart. Now she was at the gate of Saint George. The great valves had been closed but the postern still swung open to admit late travelers.

"Ho, there!" a porter cried. "A wolf comes; close the gate, 'twill yield a noble pelt!"

He seized the chain to draw the postern shut, but like a driven arrow she sped past him, out upon the moon-washed highway toward the foothills of the Lebanons whence two hours earlier she and Gaussin had ridden.

Panic raced beside her and fear ran at her heels as she swept along the road until she reached the orchard-plot where she and Gaussin had exchanged their vows. There she sank whimpering on the grass, her sides expanding and contracting with her tortured breathing. Her throat was burning, parched and dry with dust. She rose wearily and went to the brook where she had waded after noonday meat. The moon shone on a little pool of still water as she bent thirstily above it, and she shrank back, sick with fright and horror. In the mirror of the brooklet she had seen herself—her broad face gray-furred, eyes green and glowing in the moonlight, white fangs agleam, long pink tongue lolling from a black-lipped mouth.

In bitterness and agony of spirit she wept, and the long-drawn, eery belling of a wolf's howl sounded through the night: *"Woo-hoo-oo-oo-hoo!"*

GAUSSIN DE SOLLIES was making a meticulously careful toilet. In almost feverish haste he replaced the woolen hose and doublet with silk garments, and in place of the white linen surtout drew a mantle of fine damask brocade over his small-clothes.

He buckled a gold-studded belt about his waist and lashed a light curved cimeter to it with a gold chain. Finally he dashed rose water upon his hair and beard and clapped a velvet cap upon his curling red-gold hair.

He was asking much when he demanded Sylvanette de Gavaret for wife, he realized, but as he looked into the Byzantine mirror of polished silver he knew that he had much to offer.

Not in lands and gear—the good Lord knew otherwise!—but in person, and certainly in prospects. He had traveled far and fast. While most youths of his age were still serving as squires, he had worn the golden spurs of knighthood almost

four years, and yet he had just passed his twenty-second birthday.

Godson—some said love-child—of the Bishop Gilles de Saucier, he had been reared in the episcopal palace at Tyre, learning all one destined for the church should know, and many things a cleric had no right to think of. In his fourteenth year his patron died, but he had made good friends who saw him placed in service with the Warden of Antioch, where he straightway left all thoughts of robe and tonsure and addressed himself so aptly to the arts of war that before he reached his sixteenth year he had been made a captain, and in his eighteenth summer had won knighthood for bravery in the field. Two years' captivity in Cairo had made him well-nigh as familiar with the Paynim soldiery as his own, and despite his youth he was as welcome at the council table as he was at the head of his troop of mounted men-at-arms. Red-haired, blue-eyed and ruddy-faced, he was pure Norman to his fingertips, but Norman overlaid with Eastern culture, and with his forthright Frankish nature tempered and diluted with a subtlety that came from long association with the Greek and Arab. A man who had come far in a short time and would go farther, this; no maiden's father need reproach him for his lack of lands, those would surely come with ripening age, and meantime he could offer youth and strength and ardent love.

He went forth seeking no one-sided bargain, he assured himself as he mounted and rode leisurely toward the Château Gavaret and his interview with his beloved's sire.

HILAIRE DE GAVARET, Lord Constable of Acre, sat at late meat upon the terrace outside the square keep of his walled house. The Galilean moon-encrusted rooftops of the lower houses and the spires and turrets of the greater buildings with a coat of silver; a slim, soft-footed page renewed the red Greek wine in his cup; impassive Syrians held their torches high and washed the terrace with a flow of orange light that veiled the stars. Hilaire drank deeply, but not thirstily. Rather, his drafts were like those of a man who seeks to drown his apprehension. At dining-time he had been startled by the howling of a wolf outside the house, and wolves in a walled city were as rare as monks who liked not victuals or soldiers who cared naught for loot. At first he had been sure his ears deceived him, but when the sergeant of the watch assured him that he saw the beast and that it tried to force an entrance to the house he felt a chill of apprehension.

When Sylvanette was but a babe in arms an Arab sand-diviner had foretold that ere she reached the full bloom of her womanhood some great misfortune would befall her, and the wolf's cry at his door seemed like an omen. Thrice he had sent a messenger to his daughter's bower. Three times the word brought back had been the same.

She had ridden to the foothills of the Lebanons with a company of young companions, and had not yet returned. Who had been her saddlemates? Her tiring-women could not say, but they believed young Gaussin de Solliès was one. Small wonder if he was. The lad was like Sylvanette's shadow. Presently he would come suing for her hand, belike, and Sire Hilaire would inquire what he had to feed a wife withal, how he proposed to equip a house and provide bread and meat for retainers. Then with a show of great reluctance he would yield, and give them his blessing, for Sylvanette's dowry was enough for two, and he was widowed and without another heir. By the blood and bones of good Messire Saint James, he liked the lad, and—

"My Lord," a Syrian servant bowed

with deference at his elbow, "young Captain de Solliès begs for admission—"

"Bid him come, and quickly," interrupted Sire Hilaire. "By sainted Denis' sainted head, 'tis time he brought my daughter home!

"*Holà,* good Messer Jackanapes," he greeted Gaussin as the young knight stepped out on the terrace, "what ill wind blows thee hither? Or belike it is a good breeze wafts thee here, and thou art come to tell me that thou leavest for Antioch or Tyre or Constantinople. The blessed saints in Paradise grant that it be a right good distance—" While he was speaking he looked toward the doorway to the house, made sure he saw the flutter of a gown, and smiled more broadly.

So that way lay the wind, eh? The wench was hovering in the offing while her lover made his request for her hand? Now for the aspect of a stern, uncompromising sire! He choked a chuckle rising from his belly and put on a fierce look. "What would'st with me, sirrah?"

"It is about thy daughter, Messire," Gaussin replied nervously. "I am come to—"

"My daughter, quotha? And where is she? Report has come that thou rode off with her this morning while the dew still sparkled on the grass. Say, hast thou brought her back unharmed?"

The blank expression on the young man's face brought his mock-bluster to a halt.

Gaussin was looking at him open-mouthed, something like dawning terror in his eyes. The muscles tightened at the angles of his jaw, his fingers clenched the carved arms of his chair as if they clung in desperation to a tower parapet. "She—she is not here?" Fear, consternation—utter panic—forced the question from him.

For a moment they stared at each other, young knight and old campaigner. Their eyes met and nothing moved in their faces. It was as if each looked at a graven image incapable of looking back.

At length Sire Hilaire licked his lips and spoke in a voice hard and raucous as the sound of ripping parchment. "Say'st thou that she rode out with thee and thou hast dared return without her?"

Gaussin looked at him helplessly. He had left her at the cathedral before the sun went down. The streets were well patrolled by men from his own provost guard; besides, who would dare offer affront to the daughter of the Lord Constable? But he had left her—alone—to make her way unguarded and without escort through the darkling evening. True, she had wished it so, but he was a knight, sworn by oath unbreakable to guard all gentlewomen placed in his care until the sword fell from his unnerved hand.

"Messire," he began, but the Lord Constable's bellow drowned his faltering explanation.

"By holy Michael his most puissant lance, thou callest thyself knight, thou cur, thou scurvy knave, thou false poltroon!" His ruddiness gave way to a gray pallor as he leveled a taut forefinger at Gaussin. "Report thyself in close arrest to the Lord Provost, sirrah. Tomorrow I lodge my complaint before the Court of Chivalry—the good God grant me life until I see thy name struck from the roll of true sir knights!"

ALL night Gaussin paced his quarters. Hour after hour he walked a frustrated diamond-shaped pattern on the black and white marble tiles. Inside his ears, as if it echoed from his broken, empty heart a cry reverberated: "Sylvanette!"

Only this morning—or had it been a thousand years ago?—they were so happy in their new-found love. Now . . . "Sylvanette—Sylvanette!" the syllables of her name reproached him, mocked him. Once, exhausted past endurance, he threw him-

self upon his couch, but scarcely had he closed his eyes when he rose with a dreadful cry. For at the moment sleep came, there came a troop of phantoms, men bedight in knightly armor, but with crests reversed upon their shields, and when they put their vizors up skull-faces grinned at him from their helmets. "Rise, Gaussin de Solliès," they bid him in deep, hollow voices, "rise and join our company, for we, like thee, were recreant to our chivalry, and now thou art become as one of us."

Then from a cave of blazing pitch and brimstone, demons brought a helmet glowing fiery red, a lance of poison thornwood and a shield of rag stretched on a frame of willow. "Dress thyself in the armor of thy infamy, O forsworn knight!" cried the capering host of fiends. "Put on the panoply of degradation; ride the lists of infamy!"

"Mercy!" he screamed as they made to put the glowing helmet on his head. "Is there no hope, no relief?"

"Aye, brother of the damned," a skeleton in armor answered, "that there is. When thou hast fought thy way across this fiery plain and conquered every foe sent out against thee, then climbed the wall of smooth and slippery ice that hems the field of the lost spirits, thou shalt find surcease from thy sufferings, not before. And mark thee, recreant knight, each time a foeman overthrows thee in the lists another thousand years is added to thy period of torment."

He wakened bathed in sweat and gazed about him with eyes glazed with horror. Then, as he realized he had dreamed, the furious beating of his heart subsided, and once more he began his pacing back and forth across the floor.

Dawn came seeping into the gray murk of the sky like blood welling through a soiled bandage. From cathedral, church and chapel came the chiming matins of the bells:

"Hail, Mary, full of grace,
Blessèd art thou among women . . ."

HE WAS weak with weakness greater than mere bodily fatigue when they brought him forth to stand before the Masters in Chivalry and hear the charge Sir Hilaire lodged against him. His companions of the day before were summoned to bear witness, and one and all they testified, all to the same effect: That he had ridden forth with them and with the damoselle Sylvanette de Gavaret; that he and she had dropped behind when they were scarce an hour's ride beyond the city; that none of them from that moment had seen or heard of Sylvanette de Gavaret, and might the Lord do so to them, and more, if they spoke aught but the truth, and the whole truth.

Defense? What defense could he offer? That he had let the wilful maid have her way, permitted her to tarry at the cathedral while he rode off to leave her to her own devices, and make her way unguarded through the night-bound streets? A half-wit three-year child would not believe a story such as that.

The judge advocate advised him. He could not be degraded without a trial if he chose to stand upon his rights. He might have trial by ordeal, swear to his innocence and take the exorcized bread in his mouth. If he could swallow it his guiltlessness would be assumed. Or he might have recourse to compurgation, bring twelve good men and true to swear that they believed him innocent. He might have ordeal by combat, and battle with de Gavaret's champion to the death. Which would he choose?

He looked about the circling lines of knights and ladies. No eye in all the throng looked at him with aught but scorn. No hope of compurgation there. He was already condemned by the audience.

Wager of battle? He could scarcely

keep upon his feet, and the cold he had caught as he stood bathed in sweat while he looked from his window yesternight had sent an enervating fever racing through his blood. In combat he would be no match for Beppo, the Lord Provost's dwarf, much less a champion armed cap-a-pie and lusting to write *Guilty* on him with the sword.

"I choose the ordeal by the corsned," he replied. Heaven knew that he was innocent of wilful wrong, he would have given his blood drop by tortured drop for Sylvanette. Let heaven witness to his innocence.

The corsned, a small loaf of leavened bread about the size of a man's fist, was brought, and while a kitchen villein kneaded and compressed it till it bulked but half its former size the bishop's chaplain exorcized it by the ancient rite: "I exorcize thee, creature of wheat, may no evil spirit lurk in thee to aid the guilty with his wiles . . . may the power of the adversary, all the host of Satan, all evil attack, every spirit and glamour of the Devil be utterly put to flight, and driven far away. . . ."

Wine was poured upon the compressed, unpalatable bolus, and Gaussin raised his hand. "Heaven witness I am guiltless of this charge against me. If it be not so may this bread lodge in my throat and strangle me, but if I be unjustly accused may I swallow it as featly as it were a sup of wine, and may it nourish both my corse and my spirit."

The chaplain thrust the kneaded dough into his opened mouth, and he strained at it, for to bite or chew it was forbidden. For purposes of swallowing it might almost as well have been a stone, but even so he might have forced it down had it not been for the cold caught the night before. With his throat stopped by the compact mass of bread he felt the sudden tightening of the pectoral muscles which precedes a cough, strove desperately to swallow, and bent forward suddenly, face suffused and shoulders heaving. Next instant he shook with the torsion of a cough, threw back his head in effort to get breath, and shot the wad of compressed bread from his mouth like a quarrel from a crossbow. Heaven had given judgment. He was guilty.

Sentence was pronounced immediately: That his name and arms be erased from the roll of knighthood; that his golden spurs be hacked off with a scullion's cleaver; that his armor be stripped from him and beaten to a shapeless mass with sledges in the hands of villeins; that his sword and lance be broken into pieces and with his knightly harness tossed upon a dung heap, and the shield that bore his crest be dragged through the muck of a pig-sty at an ass's tail; that the embrocation of knighthood be washed from his head with lye and scalding water, after which he should be stretched upon a bier and carried to the chapel as one dead. If upon the morrow he were found within the city walls he should be pelted with manure from the stables by villeins.

As he heard the dreadful sentence of his degradation Gaussin trembled like a man with ague; then, eyes ablaze with fever and indignation, "Messires, it was no will of heaven, but my cough that made me fail the ordeal, as you know full well," he told them. "Nevertheless, when a man is foredoomed he can look for little justice from his judges. My arms and gear are in my quarters. Do with them as thou wilt, but by'r Lakin, the first man to lay hand on me, be he of noble blood or villein base, goes straightway down to hell to tell the Devil of my coming!" he roared, and leaping tiger-like snatched a sword from a sergeant and swung it naked in their faces.

None hindered him as he walked from the council chamber, none sought to stop him as he marched with flaming cheeks and blazing eyes across the parade ground

and to the city gate. The guardsmen at the portal forbore to salute him, for the rumor of his degradation had preceded him, but neither did they move to bar his way. And so, unlet, he came once more upon the highway to Tiberius where yestereve he and his dear, dear love had ridden with hearts overfilled with happiness.

Once only he looked back, and saw the grinning lackeys of the guard regarding him. Ceremoniously he raised first one foot, then the other, shaking from them the dust of the city.

FOR thirty days Gaussin held to the highway, going ever northward, past Tyre and Beirut, Antioch and Tarsus, keeping from the walled towns, sleeping in the little villages along the way, or at the farmsteads bordering the road. Fortunately for him there had been some silver and a few gold pieces in the pocket hanging at his belt; so he lacked for nothing in the way of food or shelter, and once or twice he was enabled to increase his rate of travel by hiring transportation with a wagon train or caravan which headed toward Taurus and the Armenian states.

He had started without destination or purpose other than to put as much distance as possible between him and the city of his humiliation. Of those who travel thus, without intention, the Moslems say they journey toward God's gate, and so it proved for Gaussin. A month had passed, and he was in the country of the *atabegs*, the petty war lords of Edessa whose castles looked down on the red wheat fields and who sallied out to take their toll of passing merchant trains. The night he had spent in a cedar copse, for the caravansaries of the few wretched villages which grew like fungi on the ruinous remains of the old Roman road swarmed with vermin of prodigious appetite and thieves and cutpurses no less predatory. The changing light before the dawn was brightening nearby trees and rocks and distant crenellated hills into sharp definition as Gaussin sat up with a great yawn, stretched his arms and dropped back on his couch of leaves. Then, all the luxury of languor gone from him, he crouched on one knee, sword in readiness, eyes narrowed warily. The crash of steel on steel, the hoarse shouts of contending men and the thudding of mailed feet came to him from the road.

Cautiously parting the branches he saw the combatants, one in lacquered armor who stood almost two ells tall and grasped a great sword in his hand and hewed a circle round him as if he were a scytheman standing in a field of growing grain; three men accoutered similarly lay face downward in the road, while round them surged a horde of Terkaris, lean, rapacious riders of the uplands, link-mailed and cimetered, retainers of some neighboring *atabeg* who had attacked these outlanders for loot, but now fought savagely for revenge for their losses. Across the stony field a herd of horses galloped riderless. Apparently the attackers had dismounted to creep upon their prey in silence, but had been discovered before they could strike.

Gaussin shrugged his shoulders. Let them fight it to the death. It was the Devil's business, not his. What had he to do with chivalry, or helping those beset by robbers? But the logic of his Gallic mind proved stronger than his bitterness. The robbers still were six to one, and though the giant fended them off mightily the result of the fight was forecast. If he were found by the victorious Terkaris while their blood-lust still ran at floodtide . . . he was unmounted and without armor, and while he had no reason to love life there was no call to woo death needlessly. Besides, perhaps they would not kill him, but take him to the castle to be made a slave . . . to draw water and hew wood for some barbarous *atabeg*.

"God wills it!" he raised the Crusaders' battle-cry and dashed from his ambush with sword in one hand, dagger in the other.

Gaussin had had the best instruction in weaponry procurable, and it was well for him he had, for two of the robbers turned on him, and as he looked into their faces he knew them for hasheesh-eaters rendered fearless by the drug, and fierce as hungry tigers. No followers of some small *atabeg* these, but *fedawi* of the *Shaikh al Jebal,* half-crazed followers of the Old Man of the Mountain. Broidered on their white surtouts he saw the crimson dagger of their lord and master, and with a quickly indrawn breath he realized that the fight he undertook was to the death, both now and afterward; for if he prevailed now he was a marked man, and the daggers of the secret killers would be whetted for his heart wherever he might go.

This thought flashed through his mind like a reflex, and then there was no time for thought, for swords were flashing in his eyes and he must kill or be killed. With a tremendous down-stroke he hewed the sword-hand off the nearest foeman, and as the fellow staggered back drove his dagger beneath his pointed beard, so that the fellow dropped with a startled sheep-like bleat while his companion leaped at Gaussin.

With a backstroke of his two-edged sword the young knight slashed across his adversary's eyes, hewing through the flesh and skull and into the brain, and wheeling drove his dagger straight into the teeth of a third hemp-chewer who had tripped upon the body of his comrade and so missed the stroke which he had aimed at Gaussin's heart.

Meantime the beset giant swung his flailing bloody blade, chopped an arm from one attacker, lopped the head off of another neatly as a scullion beheads a fowl, and dropping his brand leaped upon the one remaining Assassin, raised him high above his head and hurled him to the roadway with such force that his bones cracked like breaking pots.

Now they looked at each other, Gaussin and the sole survivor of the beset party, and Gaussin drew his breath in as he recognized the other. He had seen such men as this—though not of such great stature—during his captivity in Cairo. For all the butter-color of his skin the giant was of ruddy countenance, his eyes were sharply slanted toward the outer corners, and his mustache drooped in two long plaited braids. He was dressed in armor of black lacquer ornamented with designs in golden damascene. The leather helmet on his head was pot-shaped and from its top a horse-tail trailed. Upon his feet were felt boots with soles at least two inches thick, the sword he held was long as a Crusader's blade but curved and double-edged, and fitted with a cross-guard almost a foot long. A Mongol, one of those fierce riders from High Tartary who periodically swept from their deserts to overrun the lowlands, take whatever might be new and precious, then drift back to their northern steppes, leaving desolation in their wake. What was he doing here?

THE giant addressed him in fair Arabic. "My thanks to thee, most noble Frank, for that thou camest when thou did. What art thou called, and where is thy retinue? If thou wilt call them to thee I shall be glad to take thee to the tent of my commander, who will requite thee for thy courtesy."

Gaussin laughed. A short, hard, cachinnating laugh containing neither gayety nor humor. "One name will serve as well as any for such as I. As for my retinue, I stand surrounded by it. These be my followers, the winds, the rains, the tempests, the jackals and the carrion-crows that haunt deserted battlefields."

The giant Tartar looked at him inquiringly, and, glad at last to have an auditor, Gaussin poured out the story of his lost love, his trial and his degradation. If his tale affected the great Mongol he could not tell, for the yellow ruddy features were impassive, the eyes void of expression till he had finished. Then:

"A fool thou wert, but no knave," the giant decided. "Also I have seen thy swordplay, and it likes me. Dost know the country hereabout?"

"Like the lines of mine own hand."

"Good. Would'st take service with him who rules the earth?"

"Thou mean'st the Holy Father at Rome?"

"I mean the Kha Khan of the world, whose empire stretches from the Carpathians to Cathay. Captive princes bow their foreheads to the dust before him, ten times a hundred caravans bring him tribute every day, ten times a hundred thousand mighty men of war wait on his word."

"Why, then, this puissant lord of thine is just the master I would serve," replied Gaussin. If what the Mongol said were true, or even partly true, there would be fighting in this army, and loot, and glory, and a chance to make a new name for himself.

So to the north and east they rode upon two horses retrieved from the scattered herd, and when they came at last to the great Mongol camp Gaussin's eyes were like to pop from his head at the wonders they beheld.

The camp was circular in form with streets running in a series of concentric circles round a hub composed of a great hemispherical pavilion of black felt. It spread across a plain at least two miles square, yet it was closely crowded with men and horses and the gear of war. Besides the horses there were oxen, trains of camels, flocks of fat-tailed sheep. The soldiers of the Great Khan seemed as numerous as sands upon the seashore, slim, high-shouldered men in armor of black lacquered leather or link-mail, with helmets shaped like pots, their long hair braided and their lips adorned with long, fierce, drooping mustaches. Each wore a long curved sword against his thigh, at every back there was a short horn bow with a quiverful of arrows. Most carried long light lances tipped with steel and targets of bullhide thickly studded with brass bosses. The officers sat on saddles rich with cloth of gold, their cloaks were sable or gray wolfskin, silver weighed their bridles, and the hilts of their swords flashed with precious stones. On ox-carts were the mighty siege engines, mangonels and trebuchets, battering-rams and scaling-towers made in sections ready to be put together at a moment's notice, and giant cranes from whose arms swung monstrous claws of iron capable of seizing stones in castle walls and plucking them away as a man might drag a weed up by the roots. There were even clumsy mortars to throw bombs of gunpowder, and a regiment of Chinese engineers to serve them.

Gaussin made quick calculation. The host could hardly number less than threescore thousand men, he figured, but when he spoke of it to his conductor the giant laughed. This was but an outpost of the vanguard. The main force was encamped at Gaghdad where the walls had been torn down stone by stone, the city sacked and the calif smothered under carpets. The young knight trembled as he listened. Baghdad the mighty had been overthrown, its calif killed. These were not men, but devils.

In the carpeted pavilion of the Tura [general] in command of the encampment Gaussin made supreme obeisance in the manner of the Tartars, dropping to his knees and bending till his forehead touched the rug of leopardskin spread before the general's divan: "My life between thy

hands, O mighty one." Then while he squatted cross-legged on a pillow his conductor told how he had fought the Assassins, praising his skill with the sword and his courage, and ending with the declaration that he begged leave to join the Great Khan's army.

So it was arranged. Gaussin was renamed Mangoli and put in command of a troop of Uigar—named Christian—horsemen. He was given boots of heavy felt, a shirt of Persian chain-mail with a cuirass of black lacquered leather damascened with gold. Double plates of leather reinforced with iron bands flared on his shoulders; in his waist-shawl he wore two swords, one a long curved battle blade, one a straight-edged Persian weapon. His helmet was a hemisphere of lacquered leather with a flaring lobster-tail to guard his neck, and on its top was set a horse's tail for crest. He shaved the short beard from his chin and let his mustache grow until it drooped in twin braids from the corners of his mouth. Gaussin de Solliès, godson of a bishop and degraded knight of Acre, was no more. In his place rode Mangoli, captain in the horde of the Kha Khan, lord of all the lands between the plains of Poland and Korea.

LIKE the mighty car of Juggernaut the Mongol horde proceeded, and the rumble of their hoofbeats was like earth-shaking thunder, the beating of their kettle-drums was maddening. There was magic and insistence and terror in the throbbing of the booming hollow tones of the taut skins. The peoples of the earth heard it and were afraid. The sultan of Mosul made his submission, Haython, king of Armenia, bowed the knee and offered tribute. Bohemund, the Christian prince of Antioch, sent ambassadors with gifts and assumed vassalage. Cairo heard the rumble of the distant battle-drums and trembled.

Gaussin acquired merit in the eyes of his commander. His knowledge of languages and the customs of the people made him valuable as an ambassador, his courage in the field won approbation. Within two months he had been given command of a regiment of hawk-nosed Turcomans who went to battle as to a feast, had his own standard of two horse-tails borne before him, and five kettle-drummers to announce his presence when he rode before his cavalry at parade. When the war council was called and the Tura and his colonels drank fermented mare's milk from the silver-plated skulls of dead enemies he was always among those present. Often he remained as guest of the general and played chess until the false dawn brightened in the sky.

One night the Tura paused as he advanced his queen's knight, looking at Gaussin with one of his rare smiles. "Methinks I have an embassy for thee, my Mangoli," he announced.

"Hearing and obeying, O Magnificence," responded Gaussin as military etiquette required. "Thy wishes are thy slave's desires. Where would'st that I should go?"

"To the castle of the Shaikh al Jebal at Alamut."

"The stronghold of the Old Man of the Mountain?" Gaussin almost gasped. Many had gone through the portal of that place of terror, but those who came back had been few as those who returned from the grave.

"In sooth. These thrice-accurst ones have seen fit to attempt to levy tribute on us. 'Tis time they learned the Kha Khan takes but does not give. You ride for Alamut with the dawn and bear our summons to surrender to the Master of the Assassins. Go boldly and fear not. The might of the Great Khan goes with thee."

Clad in his armor of black lacquer, Gaussin stood before the Shaikh al

Jebal, Grand Master of the Assassins. For ten days he had ridden with an escort of four Kirghiz horsemen, one of whom bore the Kha Khan's long blue banner that all might know he traveled on official business, and relays of fresh horses waited them at every stopping-place. At the foot of the tall peak on which the castle of the Shaikh stood, his escort was commanded to await his return, while he was led up a long spiral causeway to the very heart of the Assassins' spider-web.

Despite the realization that he had ambassadorial immunity, Gaussin shuddered as he gazed upon the Shaikh al Jebal, Lord of Death.

Surrounded by a group of giant guardsmen stood a dais of gilded sandalwood, and on it was a huge black cushion filled with some soft wadding. In this a man sank till he seemed almost enveloped in its sable folds. He was a little man, hardly more than a dwarf, but the head that topped his narrow shoulders was enormous, and its size was magnified by the huge turban that he wore. All black, the monstrous pillow, the robe of him who sat upon it, the turban wound about his head. But his face was pasty-pale, and from it looked a pair of hot, dry, glittering eyes unchanging in expression, unwinking in their fixed, set stare as those of some great snake.

The creatures of his court fawned on the Master of the Assassins, but Gaussin neither bowed nor bent the knee. He was the emissary of the Kha Khan, ruler of the world from Krakow to Cathay.

"What petition dost thou make to Sinan, the Shaikh al Jebal, Lord of Death, O herald of the Barbarians?" asked a chamberlain.

Then Gaussin answered, keeping bold eyes leveled on the gnome-like creature squatting on the sable cushion: "Thus saith the Kha Khan, ruler of the earth—fling open wide thy gates and submit. If thou dost, this peace shall be granted thee. If thou dost otherwise, that will happen which will happen, and what it is to be we know not. The Lord of Heaven only knows. I have spoken."

Silence utter and abysmal as the stillness in the craters of a long-dead world fell at his words. Then a titter ran about the ranks of white-robed retainers who waited on the Shaikh al Jebal.

"Say," came the reply from the Old Man of the Mountain, "that Sinan, Lord of Alamut and Lord of Life and Death, bids the gipsy Kha Khan get back to his pig-sty villages beyond the mountains while he has life to go. He who triumphed over Saladin the Victory-Bringer, and took tribute from the Lion-Hearted Malik Ric of England fears no outland horde. Get thee back to herding swine and driving sheep while yet I let thee live. I have spoken."

Gaussin turned upon his heel, two retainers put a bandage round his eyes and led him through the winding exits of the castle of the Assassins.

THE causeway leading from the castle wound in a steep spiral no wider than to let two horsemen ride abreast, and with a strong watch-tower at each turn. A handful of determined men could hold it against a host. Gaussin trod warily, for the slippery roadway had no parapet, and a false step meant a fall of half a thousand feet. At last he reached the gateway in the wall that circled round the mountain foot, passed through the guard of hot-eyed, lean-faced soldiers and paused upon the outer threshold to draw a breath of clean air. It was like coming from a charnel house, this exit from the Krak al Jebal.

"Ho, comrades," he called to his waiting escort, "I am come out again!"

No answer came. Could they be sleeping? *"Hai,"* he shouted, "where be ye, sons of nearly noseless mothers, brothers

of indifferently moral sisters?" Only silence answered him, and he strode forward angrily.

The stamping of a horse attracted his attention, and as he turned toward it he caught the gleam of sheepskins in the darkness.

"Rouse ye, sons of calamity, uncles of ten thousand uncouth cockroaches!" he roared. "Stand on thy misshapen feet and tell me why ye dare sleep thus—"

His voice snapped like a frayed rope under sudden strain. The escort lay upon their backs, feet crossed, arms out as if they had been crucified against the ground, and from each breast there protruded the red handle of Assassins' murder-knives. Each body terminated in a bloody neck, and from four stakes four severed heads grinned at him. The Kha Khan's long blue banner lay upon the earth, tattered, trampled, smeared with mud and filth.

"By Allah and the good Saint John the Baptist, by the Lord Gotama Boodh, an hundred heads shall fall for each hair in thy beards, my comrades!" Gaussin swore. "And as for this insult to the Great Khan's standard—"

"Whatever falls or stands, 'twill make small difference to thee, O Tartar." Silent as shadows, four retainers of the Old Man of the Mountain had emerged from the darkness, and ranged themselves before him. The moonlight glittered on their slim curved cimeters and on the hard white teeth beneath their black mustaches.

"Thou camest bearing insults to the Lord of Death," their leader said. "Behold, we send the Kha Khan back his messengers, and though they may not speak, methinks the message they take back will be well understood. Bow thy neck to the sword, O Tartar upstart, thy day of doom has come."

Then they were on him like the wolf-pack on a stag, slashing at him with the sickles of their cimeters, digging for the joints of his harness with their venomed daggers.

He drew his battle-sword and met their charge with a mad bellow of defiance. "God wills it!"

But at the first stroke he felt consternation surging through him like cold fever. He had been disarmed when he went through the gate of Alamut, and his weapon had been returned to him in its sheath. Not suspecting perfidy, he had made no test of it, but now, as he swung it, the blade snapped in his hand where it had been sawed almost through with files.

The Assassins screamed with glee as the sword parted in his grasp, but they reckoned without that far strain of Northern blood which had trickled into Gaussin's veins from some Norse berserker. If he was formidable when armed, he was terrible in his unarmed fury.

With a mighty shout he leaped upon the foremost Assassin, grasped him in his bare hands and raised him overhead, crashing him against two others with a force that sent them sprawling in a heap. Then, before they could rise from their stunned fall, he seized a rock as great as a man's girth and smashed it down on them so fiercely that the cracking of their bones was like the sound of snail-shells trodden underfoot.

But while he dealt thus with the three, the fourth Assassin had leaped on his back and slashed his knife across his brow. He felt the poisoned steel shear through his flesh and grate against the bone as if it had been iron reddened in the fire, felt the spate of hot blood rush into his eyes, heard a terrible, wild baying, as of a wolf that closes for the kill, heard the squeaking, screaming shriek of his assailant as he loosed the strangle-hold upon his neck and dropped off of his shoulder. Then, blood-blinded and in torment from the wound the venomed dagger made, he fell fainting

to the ground beside his headless comrades.

SYLVANETTE had worn her wolfish form like a hair-shirt for almost a year. When she first realized the dreadful change that had come on her she was so prostrated with horror that she could but lie upon the orchard grass and whimper like a beaten cur, but in a little while she rose and stretched her shaggy limbs, finding a kind of pleasure in their strength and suppleness. By morning she was ravenous and trotted out in search of food. A flock was grazing in a nearby meadow, and the shepherd ran screaming at her approach, but when she seized a little woolly lamb in her jaws and heard its piteous blasts for mercy she could not find the heart to kill it, but ran with it until she overtook its panic-stricken mother and dropped the trembling baby by the ewe's side. Then, hungrier than ever, she galloped through the wood until she came upon a cotter's croft and saw a joint of mutton hanging from a hook. Pursued by frenzied curses of the farmer, she made off with the haunch of meat, feasted at her leisure and slept until the sun went down and it was time to quest for food again.

Now and then she met with other wolves. As human maid she had been terrified at the mere mention of a wolf, but in her changed shape she not only had no fear of them, but, finding herself larger than the largest of them, swaggered through their midst, helped herself to their kills, and turned with savage snarls if they disputed their queenship. Once an old she-wolf would have stood against her, but Sylvanette charged at her, bore her down and shook her as a terrier shakes a rat. Only when the other's carcass dangled limply from her jaws did she relax her hold. After that the wolf-pack gave her room, and yielded up their kills without dispute.

Northward she traveled, sometimes fifty or a hundred miles a day, seeking with her new-found beast's instinct for the solitudes of the Taurus. Presently she came upon the ashes of the circling watch-fires of a mighty Tartar camp. Food was there in abundance—knuckles of fat sheep, joints of beef scarce touched by carvers' knives, broken meats from goat stew, all that she could eat, and more. Why run the woods and fight with other wolves when here was provender in plenty, ready for the taking? So she followed the cold campfires from Armenia almost to the shores of the Sea of the Ravens.

One day as she was foraging among the trenches where the oxen had been roasted whole, she heard the drum of hoof-beats, and, true to her instincts, sank down upon her belly until her gray-furred body seemed to melt and disappear against the gray wood-ashes of the pit. Then, suddenly, she smelled it. Not exactly a perfume, but sweeter to her twitching nostrils than the finest scent of Araby or far Cathay. Long since she'd noticed that each animal and man had a scent of his own, but this was like no other, it was . . . it was . . .

The troop of horsemen galloped by, a horse-tail standard at their head, the leader wrapped in furs of gray lynx, and at the sight of him she knew. Despite his Mongol armor and the way his long mustache drooped in twin braids, she knew him. Gaussin—her Gaussin! What he did so far from Acre, riding with the leather-armored horsemen of the Cham of Tartary, she knew not, nor did she care. He was here, she had his scent, she need only follow it to be near him.

After that she stayed as close to the great camp as possible, and whenever Gaussin rode out with his followers a great gray shaggy wolf loped through the broken land that paralleled his road. When he pitched camp she stayed near. When his tents were struck she took up the march with him.

She had followed him across the winter-blasted plains to Alamut, saw him leave his comrades in the valley while he climbed the causeway to the Krak al Jebal. When the Assassins leaped treacherously upon the Mongol soldiers she growled in fury, but she dared not risk a fight with them. Gaussin might return at any moment, and she must be strong and whole to help him if he needed her.

She saw them set upon him, and her woman-wolf's heart rejoiced at the fierceness of the battle she gave them, but when the fourth Assassin leaped on Gaussin's back and struck him with his dagger she knew the time for watching had gone by. With a fierce, belling bay she pounced upon the drug-crazed man and sank her great teeth in his neck.

It was astonishing how weak human flesh could be. The man fell easily before her charge; when she worried him he made but feeble efforts to defend himself—or so it seemed to her. His arms were puny, the dagger with which he had cut Gaussin had fallen at her attack, and unarmed he was no more a match for her than the little lamb she spared had been. Exultingly, she closed her jaws upon his gullet, felt the warm blood gush, looked with fierce, fiery eyes into his terrified fast-glazing orbs, heard the strangling, blood-choked cry he gave before she tore his throat away and mangled his face with her claws.

Then she turned to Gaussin. The dagger which had wounded him . . . she had heard of those Assassins' knives . . . 'twas said they were envenomed. Feverishly she licked the red wound that barred his brow. The blood began to flow less freely. Presently it almost ceased to trickle, but still she lapped at it, hoping madly against hope that she could draw the venom from the cut before it entered his blood stream.

Gaussin came slowly back to consciousness. The wound across his brow burned like a brand and he was almost blinded with the blood that drenched his eyes, but dimly he realized a great wolf stood above him, licking the hot, bleeding cut with a pink tongue. The beast whined softly, as if to reassure him, and he sank back weakly. Presently, after the immemorial wont of wounded men, he moaned, "I thirst." The wolf left off her ministrations for a moment, then took his leather helmet in her teeth and trotted off. In a little while she came back with the headgear almost filed with water from the nearby brook. He drank greedily, and afterward he slept.

Something plucked him by the arm, softly, gently, but insistently. Presently he woke to find the she-wolf still beside him, urging him to rise. It was difficult to get upon his feet, but with his fingers laced in her thick fur he managed it, staggering drunkenly along the rough trail. His bestial guide seemed aware of his weakness, and every hundred steps or so she halted while he gathered back his strength. Also, he noted, she kept from the high-road, following the woodland paths, sometimes halting with a fierce low growl while she sniffed the air; once or twice she dragged him down, and shortly afterward a troop of Assassins rode past at a gallop.

HOW long he traveled thus he had no accurate idea. He knew only she guided and sustained him, licked his festering wound until it began to heal, lay close to him and warmed him with shaggy body when he slept, and ranged the woods to bring back hares or pheasants or suckling pigs for his fare.

At last there came a day when she appeared to think it safe to take the open road, and as they trudged along he heard a sound he had not thought to hear again, the rumble of Tartar kettle-drums. In a few minutes he saw them, a troop of leather-armored horsemen with horse-tails

trailing from their helmets, lance-tips glinting in the morning sun.

"Mangoli Khan!" the leader cried. "Praise be to such gods as perhaps there are! We had not thought to see thee. The Old Man of the Mountain sent thy four companions' heads to us; thee we thought he had surely slain, also."

The she-wolf turned under Gaussin's hand, freeing her shoulder from his clutch. She made a sound half whine, half moan, and would have turned into the brush, but Gaussin dropped upon his knees beside her.

"Nay, Lady Wolf, good, sweet wolfkin, I will not have it so!" he denied. By all the blessed saints in Paradise, I swear I love thee, dearest beast!" And with his arms about her furry neck he kissed her full upon the hairy mouth.

He thought it was delusion, or return of his delirium, for instead of the rough, wiry pelt of the she-wolf he felt a mass of soft black tresses, perfumed with the spice of Araby, across his cheek; instead of the wolf's hairy muzzle a pair of lips as soft as rose leaves pressed against his mouth. She was clinging to him. He could feel her heart beat. Her hair was fragrant on his cheek. No she-wolf, this, but a sweet, softly-molded woman. His Sylvanette!

He said her name slowly, wonderingly. Then, as in the foothills of the Lebanons:

"Sylvette ma drue! Sylvette ma mie!
En vous ma mort, en vous ma mie!"

Came her answer, low and tender-sweet:

"Bel ami, ainsi, va de nous!
Ne vous sans moi, ni moi sans vous!"

The stolid Tartars of the guard showed small astonishment at seeing a woman where there had been a she-wolf. On the steppes of Muscovy where they were weaned the *vrykolakas*—man-wolf—was almost as common as the house-dog, and those who chose to shift their shapes did so, nor was it any concern of their neighbors. Methodically they made two litters of sheepskin coats stretched over lances and bore the fainting Mangoli Khan and his wolf-lady back to camp.

HOW the armies of the Kha Khan laid siege to the fortress of the Old Man of the Mountain and plucked it apart stone by stone as children break a house of blocks; how the Grand Master of the Assassins went in chains to the blue-tiled court of the Great Khan at Karakorum and was never seen again is another story. Our concern is with Gaussin and Sylvanette.

Not until they had been wed did they hear each other's odysseys.

They lay upon their couch of skins with rugs of sables and lynx fur over them, and through the tent's thick walls of black felt came the muted thunder of the kettle-drums.

He stroked the hair that tangled round her neck, and at his touch the small pulse in her throat quickened. For a long time they lay thus; then she raised herself to draw the heavy coils of her hair from beneath her shoulders. Her lips touched his. Touched, and clung. "O my beloved," she murmured, "'twas thy kiss that set me free from wolfshead."

"What say'st thou?" he answered sleepily.

"I said thou gavest me freedom from my wolfish shape with thy kiss. For this was the condition which La Crainte made when she ensorcelled me: 'Take and retain the form of a she-wolf until some noble lord shall kiss thy hairy beast's-lips and declare his love for thee'"

"His body leaned into the wind, a spectral shadow doom-haunted."

The Crystal Horde

By HARRY WALTON

Jagged spears claiming their victims, the huge crystal globes rolled over a terrified world whose end seemed very near.

"DANGEROUS!" muttered Peter Landers, laying the pinkish, sharp-spiked little sphere upon the work-bench to fuss with the galvanometer leads. "These things are deadly. *I know.*"

Tony Mills nodded, unwilling to contradict the older man in what had become a

fixed idea with him. Yet it was too absurd to credit, this conviction of Landers that the Martian crystals, first brought to earth by his own father twenty years ago, were a menace. The strange, unearthly beauty of them, the mystery and desolation of the red planet that somehow inhered in them—these Mills could grant; but that the crystals were other than what they seemed—exotic jewels of an alien world—he could not believe.

Yet this was what Landers was trying to prove to an incredulous world, this the purpose of his endless, futile experiments here in his private laboratory in the Berkshires. Daily for six months Mills had watched him, and the slow decadence of a brilliant mind. Belief had become obsession with the man. The scientific world that had once respected him now called him mad. But Tony Mills thought him merely ill.

"The clamps, Tony!" Landers snapped churlishly. "I want the clamps!"

Mills found them, refusing to flare up over the older man's petulance. He watched Landers fumble with the galvanometer connections in a manner characteristic of him now—of the aged, somehow senile Landers. Mills himself picked up the crystal, held the starry, pink-white cluster gingerly against the light.

The spiny form of this one was rare. Most of the crystals were smooth ovals or spheres. Expensive at first, when collectors had paid a fortune for the few brought back by the elder Landers on his epochal space-journey to Mars, their popularity had spread as they had become cheaper and more plentiful. Scarcely a family, rich or poor, but treasured one or more of them.

A name had been coined for them: "Marsistals." Crystals from Mars! What wonder they had captured the popular fancy? What wonder that you could almost sense a world of alien life within the clouded heart of them, or that Peter Landers should seize upon them as the fertile field of his delusions?

Tony Mills laid the crystal down, wiped his hands unobtrusively as though to cleanse them of unseen contamination—and cursed himself for doing so.

Landers put the crystal into a tiny vise, adjusted contact cups to bear against the thing's spines, and tightened the vise with unnecessary care—unnecessary, because it was impossible to break a Marsistal by any means known to man. All efforts to crack, grind or polish them had been unsuccessful. Carborundum and diamond failed to scratch their impregnable surface. Their structure and substance remained a mystery, baffling analysis, resisting acid, X-rays, the electric furnace.

For twenty years the crystals had been studied, even tested, as Landers was testing this one, for Piezzo effects. There are crystals which, by some curious molecular friction within, generate a minute electrical current when subjected to pressure. Marsistals did not. But Landers tightened the vise, watched the galvanometer intently. The pointer, which would indicate the feeblest flow of current, remained motionless.

Tony Mills roused himself. There was little he could do for Landers, and that little he had done. His own work waited—the ultra-short-wave experiments which he was concluding, upon which depended his future—and Marcia's future with him. The thought of her was a heady wine, invigorating.

"I have to be going," he said. "Lots of work to finish."

"Fine, Tony. Fine," responded Landers absently, toying with the crystal. "Damn! These things are sharp."

MILLS grunted sympathy as the older man inspected his thumb. There was no blood, and after a moment Landers went to work again with trembling, inept fin-

gers. Mills stared broodingly at the instrument. A sharp exclamation from Landers startled him. Unbelievingly he saw the galvanometer needle heel sharply over.

Simultaneously there was a sound, like the quick indrawing of breath a man takes in sudden agony. It took Mills perhaps a tenth of a second to tear his eyes away from the galvanometer, and by then a terrible silence had set in, upon which his own gasp of incredulous horror broke loudly.

Peter Landers was slumped over beside the work-bench with a spear of crystal through him. Even in death, what was left of his hand still grasped the thing, except that the thumb—the same he had pricked before and must have pierced upon one of those needle-sharp spines just before he cried out—was a bloody stump. The crystal itself, for that lightning-brief instant during which all photographed itself upon Mills' vision, was as before except for a single foot-long sliver that stabbed out from it and dribbled blood behind Landers' back.

But the thing must have started to grow immediately. Landers' body stirred, and a second crystal splinter spurted out below a shoulder-blade. More followed, with a constant crisp *tinkling* like the breaking of innumerable very thin glass rods, a musical shower of sound—brittle, delicate, terrible.

Mills leaped across the room, away from the spiked horror. It continued to grow, new spears thrusting out explosively to the accompaniment of that grisly chorus of sound. Then, suddenly, it stopped growing because it had assimilated Landers' body, bone, blood and gristle. It paused in its growth and there was silence.

It was still a spiked cluster, spherical, with a diameter now of about six feet. Upon its spears clung shreds of clothing, a metal buckle, pieces of a shoe. The crystal itself was spotless, unstained by the blood it had absorbed. Its color seemed deeper, but that may have been due to its greater size.

Mills swore, a low stream of vituperation that seemed to suck the poison of fear from him as he spat it forth. Slowly he edged toward the door, lest a footstep reveal to the thing that life remained in this room of death.

That swift, surging growth must have left it unoriented for the moment, its faculties as yet unconditioned to its new size and environment, for Mills gained the door and was able to bolt it shut from the outside. From the woodshed he got hammer and nails and enough lumber to board up the laboratory windows. He locked the house and took the keys with him. His thoughts, as he returned to his own cabin, ran riot.

Landers had given ghastly proof of his madcap theory. How had he known? What had prompted the belief that became obsession, that ordered his life and resulted in his death? What had he known that science and reason had overlooked for twenty years? Had it been merely a "hunch," part of Peter Landers' tragic heritage from a family intimately associated with the crystals from the first?

Ralph Landers and his flight partner Comstock had been first to reach Mars, first to bring the glittering baubles to earth. And Ralph Landers had perished in his rickety, ill-built little ship during a second attempt to reach the red world. His wife had clung stubbornly to the belief that the crystals had brought about his death, although even now that seemed impossible. She had begged her son to avoid them as a curse. Queer and old-fashioned that had sounded to the Twenty-First Century, which had abolished curses and like superstitions from its complacent scheme of things. But even this modern age hadn't abolished mother love or that strange thing called intuition—the unreasoned wisdom of a mind sharpened by love and loss. And

Peter Landers had perished—by a Marsistal.

But what was done was done. Mills forced himself to deliberate upon the immediate problem. Landers would not be missed soon; he had tolerated so few visitors, had kept so constantly indoors, that even his immediate neighbors rarely saw him. Nor were these likely to approach the Landers place. Warren Pastor, ostensibly a writer but addicted to day-dreaming and sporadic playing of the violin, was far too immersed in himself to betray the faintest interest in any other living thing. And Burk Hall, who with his blind father lived on a stony, little farm nearby and raised prize-winning hogs, could ill afford time away from his work to inquire into his neighbors' affairs. No one else was near enough to count.

MILLS saw nothing to be gained by notifying the local constabulary. The village authorities were not of the caliber to deal with a problem such as this one. But who was? How was the swollen crystal to be disposed of? Acid, fire, lightning itself would have no effect upon it, if it retained, as he felt bitterly certain it did, the known properties of a Marsistal. If buried, would it not feed upon the very worms, and thrust itself again to the surface in convulsive growth? Was it perhaps best to immure it in Landers' laboratory, to seal it behind concrete walls?

Certainly he dared attempt nothing of himself. Once Landers was missed, suspicion would rest upon him, as the scientist's sole companion. For Mills' own sake there must be witnesses to the giant crystal's existence. Warning must be given, for the menace existed, potentially, everywhere.

It was a simple matter to put through a radiophone call to the nearest Federal Police post, not so simple to explain to a bored desk sergeant why he wanted a detail sent to a tiny hamlet in the Berkshires. Mills had no intention of telling the story to an incredulous underling; to be dubbed a crank or a drunk would result in his call being ignored entirely. Besides that, the police wave-band was a public one, and casual listeners-in might spread the facts, create needless panic. He forced himself to be content with a promise that a police plane would arrive by morning, reflecting that the matter could well wait until then, that nothing could be done tonight.

Mechanically he turned to his own work on the ultra-short band. His receiver brought in immediately a piping, reedy whistle which he assumed to be a test call of some kind. But when, tired of waiting for the sender to identify himself, he tuned elsewhere in the band, it was to encounter the same signal all over the dial. In desperation he settled back, frowning over his thoughts, hearing again the brittle tinkle of the crystal's ghastly growth, seeing in memory that indelible mind-photo of Peter Landers with a spear of crystal dripping blood behind his back—only a little blood, because the thing absorbed it so quickly—absorbed it through an impregnable surface which no agency on earth could so much as scratch!

Monotonous, rhythmic rather than mechanical, resembling ancient voodoo drums and tom-toms rather than a test call, the mysterious signal continued. Upon impulse Mills swung a stratospheric direction finder upon it, plotted its readings, and felt a creeping chill gather along his spine as the result stared up at him from the chart.

The area intersected by the lines was perhaps half a square mile. On the map, it was that territory bounded by the nearby village of Spotswell, the cabin of Warren Pastor and his wife, and Mills' own place. In almost the exact center of that triangle stood the Landers laboratory, from which a giant Marsistal, swollen on human food, was sending forth the call of its kind—a

clarion call of growth, triumphant, hungry, strong.

2

MILLS slept badly and was starkly awake when the door-chime rang early the following morning. Upon the threshold stood Burk Hall, a strapping, red-headed young giant, his brow now wrinkled with unwonted thought.

"I reckoned I'd better wake you," he told Mills. "You'd know what to do. There's been an explosion up at Landers'."

"An explosion?" Mills felt his heart miss a beat. "When? What happened?"

"Don't rightly know when. I didn't hear nothin'. But I seen it when I started my chores. Whole side of the house is ripped out, like from inside. You could drive a cow through the hole, easy."

"Did you see—anything?"

"Just only what I told you. What'll we do now?"

"I'll advise the police," offered Mills. "You go back—no, run and tell Pastor and his wife to stay indoors—the fool hasn't a phone. Tell them not to budge from the house. Then get back to your place and stay there—inside. Don't ask questions now; I'll explain later."

Hall left, muttering. Mills dialed the police post on the radiophone, but received no reply. Angrily he switched on his speaker, prepared to rebuke some sleepy exchange operator. But no operator answered. Instead came a maddening "pee-whit, pee-whit, pee-whit"—monotonously regular, unvarying, and blanketing not the short-wave, but the radiophone band this time. With furious energy Mills checked his apparatus. His sender was undoubtedly functioning, but its output was scarcely equal to that of the interfering signal. Whether his call was being received or not, he could not tell. Any reply would be drowned out by that insanely repetitious whistle. There was nothing to do but to wait for the detail plane promised him the night before.

Only one man in the neighborhood would have imagination enough to credit the fantastic truth—Warren Pastor. That Pastor wasn't a practical man did not matter at the moment. Mills felt a compelling urge to share the terrible facts with someone.

He left his house and struck out for the writer's cabin, keeping sharp watch as he hurried on. From the top of a rise he saw Landers' laboratory, with one wall broken out, the splintered beams showing. Impossible to doubt that the Marsistal, possessed of some strange locomotive power, had escaped.

The Pastor place was as slovenly as the man himself. A weed-strangled garden, a dingy hammock, a litter of boxes and camp stools everywhere—for Pastor wrote, dozed, or played the violin wherever the fancy struck him—these were expressive of the man, as was his refusal to install even an old-fashioned wire telephone or other more modern conveniences. Under a lean-to Nancy Pastor bent over a washtub, her bare arms beaded with suds.

"Is Warren inside?" he asked, and after her stolid nod added: "Please come with me, Mrs. Pastor. Right away."

Wordlessly she followed him, faced Mills and her husband as silently inside the cheerless living-room, her features a strange blend of patience and shrewishness, of nag and drudge. Pastor called her his Xantippe. God knew, thought Mills, the poor woman had better reason to bewail her lot than the notorious wife of Socrates.

Warren Pastor himself remained lying on a couch, his eyes half closed, a bottle of whisky on the table beside him.

"Has Burk Hall been here?" Mills asked angrily.

Pastor opened his eyes for a moment. "He was—with a stupid story about Lan-

ders' place exploding. That old fool will blast himself to hell one of these days. But that was no reason for Nancy to stay indoors. She had her work to do."

"Landers is dead," Mills announced bluntly, and told the story, omitting nothing. "The Marsistal is at large now. It can move, can hunt its food. Nobody is safe outdoors."

They waited for him to continue, offering no comment.

"But there may be greater danger than ours," Mills plunged on. "Those signals last night—they weren't mechanical, like this morning's. They had meaning. They were intended to be heard. What if there are—or will be—*others?*"

Pastor sat up abruptly, his abundant hair wildly unkempt, his lean, bony face twitching. "Others, yes! Then—Judgment! Judgment of your kind and Landers' kind—of all the fools who worship what they call progress, who put a halter around their necks and call it science. Judgment, when those who reached the stars find it was only to bring their doom to earth!"

His eyes blazed fanatically as he poured himself a drink and gulped it. Mills watched with a sickening sense of futility. Nancy Pastor glanced from him to her husband, a dull urgency in her spiritless eyes.

"But we haven't seen it," she said at last. "It must be gone, or we would have seen it. And I can't stay indoors, with all my washing to finish."

Pitifully intent upon the work awaiting her, she shuffled out before Mills could stop her. Before the apathy of the wife, the fanaticism of the husband, he felt worse than helpless. In all likelihood no argument he could offer would have kept her. As for Pastor, it was in keeping with his fatalism to make no objection. Mills turned upon him angrily.

"You're going to ask me what's to be done," taunted Pastor before Mills could speak. "And I'll tell you. Nothing! It's Judgment!"

"I was a fool to come here," said Mills. "It was only that I wanted somebody besides myself to know——"

FROM outside came a shrill drawn-out shriek. Mills hit the door solidly and was through before Pastor got to his feet. What he saw froze the blood in his veins. Nancy Pastor was running wildly toward the lake, and the Marsistal pursued her, rolling on those incredibly hard spikes with a curious, hesitant, space-consuming gallop. The thing was larger than it had been in the laboratory; perhaps it had fed since. And perversely Mills's mind took note, even as he dashed after the thing, that the crystal's rhythm of motion, a pause and a rush, a pause and a rush, was exactly that of the "pee-whit, pee-whit" of the radiophone band.

He plunged madly after it, the ground slope toward the lake speeding him on, but quickening also the gait of the sphere. Pause and a rush . . . pause and a rush. . . .

Nancy Pastor looked back once, terror in her haggard face. In blind panic she ran on, unseeing, straight toward a half-folded camp stool that lay where Pastor had flung it. Mills shouted warning at the top of his voice. She gave no heed. A moment later she sprawled headlong over the stool, rolling over once in a pitiful effort to gain her feet before the crystal reached her.

It hesitated for a barely perceptible instant, then went on as before—a rush and a pause, a rush and a pause—with Nancy Pastor spreadeagled upon its spikes and turning over and over with it as though lashed to a gigantic St. Catherine's wheel.

The Marsistal rolled on toward the lake, into the water with a splash, out from shore like some bizarre aquatic creature returning to its element, until the blue-green surface closed over it. Mills stared stupidly

at crimson flecks of blood spotting the grass. In the trail of the thing the greensward was indented with sharp prick marks.

He turned away, almost colliding with Pastor. For once the complacent shell of egotism surrounding the man was pierced. But he allowed Mills to take his arm, to lead him back to the Pastor cabin, walking as in a stupor, muttering over and over again a single word: "Judgment!"

Mills's own wirephone—an antiquated village affair—was ringing madly when he returned to his place. The postmaster, calling from the nearby hamlet, was almost incoherent with fright. Haltingly he gave Mills a message: that the Federal Police post found itself unable to spare the promised detail, in view of a nation-wide emergency that demanded every available man and made it impossible to respond to routine calls for the time being. What emergency? Hadn't he, the postmaster asked frantically, seen the day's tele-news sheets?

Mills thanked the man. The Federal Police call had no doubt come through sometime when the Marsistal had been at rest, when the interference accompanying its movement was not abroad. His own radio-printed news sheet confirmed that guess; it was a mere smear in spots, but there was sufficient legible print to tell its hideous story a dozen times over, under as many date-lines.

Two hundred deaths of wearers of Marsistal jewelry were recorded, in Capetown, London, Tokyo, New York, and even in the new ultra-smart Antarctic resorts. Crystals ten feet in diameter were rolling down Unter den Linden in Berlin, down New York's Fifth Way, over San Francisco's ancient Golden Gate Bridge. Scores of persons were missing in cities, towns, and open countryside.

With the terror scarcely ten hours old, already a dozen theories existed to account for it. Comstock, one of the men first to bring the crystals to earth, suggested that they might have been but one form of life upon ancient Mars, that in their blind lust for food they might have wiped out all other life without trace, until themselves starved into a state of suspended animation.

Mills found that easy to believe. For eons those horned spheres must have roamed a world their rapacious appetite had denuded of all other living things. Finding no more food, they must have settled in the dust of the red world at last, such life as dwelt in them, immortal as human life is measured, sustained by the slow consumption of their own bulks, drawing such infinitesimal energy as it required from the residue of their bodies, until these had shrunk to the tiny ovals, spheres and spiked clusters Comstock and Landers had found. Possibly the spiked crystals were those that had fed a little longer than the rest, and so were a little less removed from their original form.

The substance of the things? Perhaps an allotropic form of some familiar element, yet differing from that element as greatly as a diamond, that superlatively hard allotropic form of carbon, differs from ordinary carbon. Crystalline matter endowed with life! Invulnerable, fittest of all living things to survive—and to conquer!

Brought to earth and into daily contact with compounds new to their chemistry of life, they had by some evolutionary magic, over that period of twenty years, slowly altered their metabolism to assimilate the new life stuff present all around them—*carbon*. Until yesterday, shrunken, incapable of movement, they had been content with such quantities as they could absorb from the carbon dioxide of the air. How could their smooth, spineless bodies have availed themselves of the unfamiliar but abundant food supply at hand—flesh and blood?

IT WAS inevitable that a crystal which had retained its spines should first partake of that food, so prolific of swift growth. Through no effort of its own, but because of Landers' trembling, clumsy fingers, one of its needle-sharp points had pierced flesh, its altered metabolism had responded instantly to what it now sensed was food, and horror had followed.

Already the call that had gone forth from the thing in Landers' laboratory had borne grisly fruit. The last link in the crystals' life-chain had been forged when that signal had flashed around the world, macabre command to burst their crystal walls and feed. Overnight, with such energy as remained to them or they could gain from carbon dioxide, they had put forth tiny crystalline needles, thirsty for the flesh food all about—and woe to the wearer of the awakened Marsistal, or to the first to handle a hitherto harmless ornament!

What of Marcia? She had never worn Marsistals, Mills remembered with relief. In the neat, business-like observatory atop Mount Wilson, where she assisted her father, there were none of the accursed things. Nor was it likely that one could make its way up into the pylon-supported observatory. Marcia, he thought gratefully, was safe.

From the graveled road leading past the house came the pad of running feet. Mills went to the door and saw that it was Warren Pastor, hurrying past as though driven by some hypnotic urge, his eyes fixed, his tangled hair flying free. Mills sprang after him, shouting, until he saw Pastor turn toward the village. He would probably get drunk there and forget for a time, Mills decided. It would be as well to let him go.

Returning to the house, Mills succeeded in putting a call through to the Police post, and made a full report. He was assured that the matter would be "investigated in due course"—a promise in which he put little faith.

With the radio-news sheet under his arm, he walked through the little pear orchard beyond which lay the Hall farm. The stuttering song of Hall's tractor reached him before he topped the rise overlooking the field, half red and furrowed, half green. The machine was at the far end, Burk Hall a pigmy behind its steering-wheel and levers. Mills hallooed loudly. The tractor swung around.

Watching it against the sun, Mills caught the first glint of whirling crystal knives rising behind the ridge. Immediately the thing came fully into view, began rolling downhill with that curious, hesitant, yet speedy gait, splashing color from a thousand facets. The Landers crystal! It was larger than before; each revolution therefore carried it farther, and its speed was formidable. A man on foot would have had no chance of escape. Nor had its immersion in the lake harmed it. It must have consumed Nancy Pastor's body beneath the surface, and emerged—hungry.

Mills screamed warning, gesticulated madly, prayed that slow-moving, slow-thinking Burk Hall would understand before it was too late. Hall saw the crystal, and menace was too plain in those flashing daggers for even him to misunderstand. He jerked a lever, lifting the plowshare from the soil, and gunned the tractor's engine to full speed. The clumsy machine lumbered for the orchard, not swiftly, but still faster than a man could run—fast enough perhaps to elude the glittering horror behind.

A shambling figure came down from the porch of the Hall house and shuffled into the sunlight. Mills, too far away to act, sensed rather than heard the blind man's querulous voice raised in senseless questioning. With maddening deliberation he shuffled closer to flashing death. Burk Hall saw the old man's danger, swung the tractor in a tight arc, tempting the crystal to follow.

It was abreast of the pig-sty then, and whatever senses the thing had decided it in favor of the thousand-odd pounds of pork nearby. It swerved, crashed through steel stakes and wire fencing, mowing down the enclosure like so much stubble. The pigs squealed, a shrill trumpet of fear that was cut off in full voice. Their carcasses, swung aloft on that gigantic spiked wheel, were already half consumed.

Nor was the thing sated. Horrified, Mills saw it curve toward the elder Hall, now standing in trembling indecision full in its path. The daggered juggernaut rolled down upon him, paused in its relentless gait for one brief instant. The old man did not cry out. Above the tractor's roar came the dry, penetrating tinkle of the crystal's growth.

Burk Hall swung the tractor about again and drove for the crystalline horror at full speed, throttle wide open, exhaust belching blackly, upon his face the passions of the damned.

Twenty feet from the crystal he flung himself clear. The tractor ran true, crashing solidly with a grinding of metal against the gleaming spines. Its front wheels reared, clawed upward as though to climb that formidable bulk. The machine, upended, at last fell on its side like an upset toy.

But it had stopped the crystal for an instant, long enough for Burk Hall to reach the tiny shack set well apart from the house, and to set Mills' heart pounding with hope. Hall did all the stump-work in the vicinity, blasting out unwanted tree roots, breaking rocks for removal. In the shack was enough detronite to blow Spotswell out of the country.

HALL reappeared, a yellow-and-red bundle in his hand capped with the ominous purple of a detonator. A stumble, a touch, would explode that fistful of death. But he was sure-footed, deliberate. He flung the explosive at a suicidal distance of fifty feet.

A tremendous blast swept Mills from his feet, left him gasping, stone-deaf. He felt blood on lips and neck where nose and ears bled from the concussion, simultaneously realizing that he was sprawled full length. Rolling over slowly, he sat up. Something plummeted out of the sky and struck deep, quivering, into the soft earth where he had been lying.

It was a sliver of crystal, perhaps three inches long, vibrating there with the force of its descent. Shuddering at his narrow escape, he still felt a thrill of triumph. The detronite must have broken that off. Had it shattered the monster sphere?

That hope was quickly blasted as he caught sight of the thing rolling lakeward. The explosion must have sheared a few thin spines from it, must have rocked it to the core to send it scurrying off so, but had done it no real harm.

Mills hoisted himself drunkenly to his feet and lurched toward Hall, who lay face down where the explosion had flung him—dead, probably, before he struck the ground; certainly dead now, for from his back jutted a slender knife of crystal that sparkled in the sun. Two, three steps more Mills took after the fact registered upon his dulled senses. Upon the fourth he froze motionless.

For Burk Hall stirred strangely. As a corpse moves that is shaken by an alien hand, he rose in ghastly resurrection—rose upon crystal shafts that burst tinkling from his chest, his throat, his thighs—that sang as they devoured him, and in their multitude grew round and spiny like a gigantic thistle, while the wind bore away their song of growth, crisp, musical, like the breaking of innumerable thin glass rods.

Mills ran then as though his feet had been suddenly uprooted. He was past his own house before he was sufficiently recovered from panic to slow to a walk, and

fought the horror seething in his brain while he continued on into the village. Reason told him that all he had seen was but an infinitesimal cross section of a tragic whole. Not one of these deaths so close to him differed essentially from similar tragedies in France or China or New Zealand. Not one but was a mere variation in the death-theme that underlay the saga of mankind. Horror multiplied was the fact, a thousand times more acute in the crowded cities than in this sparsely-settled region.

3

IN THE village store and post office, when he finally reached it, vociferous groups were discussing the news bulletins whose ghastly headlines frowned from the walls. An attempt to poison the crystals with beef blood, in which quantities of deadly chemicals had been mixed, had failed utterly. The spheres had absorbed all voraciously—and grown larger. Emergency regulations required that all Marsistals be turned over to police authorities. A shop prominent for marketing the dread jewels had been wrecked by a fear-crazed mob.

A state militia company had been wiped out in an attempt to destroy four Marsistals with liquid fire. Witnesses told how the spheres had plunged eagerly into the flames, hungry for the hydro-carbons present in the fuel and visibly expanding as they assimilated them. After attaining a diameter of fifteen feet, two Marsistals had exploded. The deadly shower of crystal splinters following had accounted for most of the casualties. More than a score of new spheres had sprung into being, grisly offspring of those destroyed by this bizarre mode of reproduction. The postmaster-storekeeper joined Mills before the bulletin board, volubly frightened. Two villagers had seen a monster crystal in the vicinity. A hysterical boy had brought a tale of seeing it devour a huge Guernsey bull. The man prattled on, Mills scarcely hearing, so immersed was he in his own thoughts.

"And now it's my crystals," groaned the postmaster. "The two we've had since our wedding. You remember we kept them here in the store, for show. When the bulletin ordered everybody to turn 'em in, I picked up a pliers to handle 'em with. And when I turn my back the things disappear. Gone, and the dust not settled yet where they'd been——"

"Wait!" snapped Mills. "Had Warren Pastor been here?"

"Sure," responded the postmaster. "But he didn't stay. Didn't even seem to want anything. Seemed kind of——"

Mills left him gaping. There was no time to explain—no time for anything but the greatest haste if another daggered horror were not to be born within the hour. What insane purpose could have moved Pastor he could not imagine.

MILLS scarcely expected to find the man alive. But even before reaching the Pastor cabin he heard the thin, wailing notes of a violin rising upon melancholy minor scales, and these repeated with minute variation again and again. Nor was this the careless playing Pastor usually indulged in; it was deliberate, intent, purposeful. Mills stole up to a window and was able to look into the house—and promptly wondered whether Pastor had gone mad.

The man sat upon a stool, hunched forward, his face twisted out of all semblance to the cool cynic he had been—and fiddled to the crystals! The two Marsistals stolen from the village store lay upon the table before him, and to them Pastor addressed his playing, that weird, sobbing, infinitely varying sound pattern which seemed to seek a hidden, esoteric note—and found it suddenly!

From the instrument surged a shrill,

long-drawn tone, quavering eerily upon the stillness. One of the crystals vibrated briefly in resonance with it, dancing like a drop of water on a hot plate—and shivered into fragments!

The sight left Mills a-tremble. Exultant in this revelation, he forgot Pastor, forgot his own danger there on the hillside where Nancy Pastor had been killed, forgot death itself. The Marsistals could be destroyed! Sound could shatter them! Already he saw huge sound-projectors, mobile units which would disintegrate the spiked horrors, a world reclaimed from death.

Pastor rose and with the violin under one arm left the house. Mills intercepted him. In the other's dilated pupils, in the flaring nostrils, in the head thrown too far back, but most of all in the black and burning eyes, Mills read what Pastor meant to do. A blind longing for vengeance had in one brief hour replaced all the calm, futile cynicism of the man. For the first time he was afire with purpose—to destroy the great crystal sphere as he had destroyed the Marsistal on the table. He was an impractical dreamer even in that; for Mills knew that even if the resonance frequency of the monster crystals were not radically different from that of the small one, a far greater volume of sound must be directed against it to shatter that ton or more of living stone.

Cunningly, Pastor seemed to sense that Mills wished to stop him. He broke into a run, madness lending him wings; so that Mills, although younger and in better physical condition, was still thirty feet behind when Pastor dropped into the little motor-skiff Mills kept at the lake. A touch of a button, and its electric engine churned into life, swiftly propelling it from shore. Lacking so much as a rowboat in which to follow, Mills stood helpless at the landing. The lake was large, and great fringes of brush would make it impossible to follow the skiff by land.

Troubled, he returned to the Pastor cabin. Into a tin box he slipped the undamaged Marsistal. Then, yielding to an uneasy impulse, he scooped the fragments of the other into a carton. He chose the lake path home in the hope of seeing Pastor.

There was no sign of him, however, and Mills forgot him as, reaching his own laboratory, he was assailed by sudden doubt—by a suspicion that struck chillingly at the very root of his hope. Quickly he fashioned a long wire holder, inserted a large fragment of the shattered crystal, and held it cautiously—mindful of the fate of the militia company—in the flame of a bunsen burner. Nothing happened, except that after thirty seconds the supposed crystal fragment, red hot, formed a tiny globule and dripped from the wire.

Irony that only here, in the rustic backcountry, could Pastor still have found an *imitation* Marsistal! Skilfully blown of ordinary glass, colored to defy detection, the imitations had been immensely popular years ago when the real crystals were worth a small fortune each. And such a thin glass shell Pastor had destroyed.

But was his inspiration entirely false? Was it not possible that sound waves, or else ultra-sonic vibrations beyond the range of audible sound, might penetrate the invulnerable shell of those engines of death? Must not every slender thread of hope be followed to its end, if the horror and heartbreak of today were not to be multiplied until civilization crumbled?

Removing the shards of the genuine Marsistal from its tin container, Mills examined them carefully. A hundred times he had seen it, a flat, smooth rectangle of no striking beauty, in the village store. But now there grew from one oval fragment a dozen or more needle-sharp protuberances scarcely a tenth of an inch long, tiny crystal teeth athirst for blood.

Putting it in a safe place, he went to

work. Condensers, oscillators and modulating-coils for the generation of a wide range of frequencies were at hand, and loudspeakers to convert these currents into sound of tremendous volume. In his first experiment, with a shrill, keening whistle, he shattered a drinking-glass, but the Marsistal remained intact. Successive experiments, during which he was repeatedly deafened by the cataracts of sound unleashed, also left the crystal untouched. Outside, dusk deepened into night. He worked furiously on.

4

TOWARD midnight a sibilant whisper outdoors roused him from his labors. From the doorway he recognized the ghostly outline of a small mono-speedster against the sky. It settled softly, and something familiar about the little ship set his heart throbbing in his throat. He ran out, up the hillside, to meet the slim, knicker-clad figure alighting.

He clasped her roughly to him, in pain at sight of her in this valley of death. Her eyes, luminous in moonlight, were still unafraid.

"Marcia! You should never have come."

"You were here," she answered simply. "You didn't answer my calls——"

Silently he berated himself for neglecting to glance at his radiophone recorder. Her presence unnerved him; he was afraid as he had not been even in Landers' laboratory—afraid for her.

"Come. Let's hurry inside."

He felt her tremble at the first whisper of sound, carried by some vagrant air current—a thin wail rising and falling in unearthly cadence. The thrill of her soft, clinging body was lost as the significance of that weird melody smote him. Warren Pastor, somewhere in the night, courted death in his search for vengeance.

Marcia stifled a cry as she saw it—the stooped, bareheaded figure upon the ridge, silhouetted against a low bank of clouds, leprous-white in moonlight. The thin black line of his bow moved up and down in rhythm with his plodding step. His body leaned into the wind, a spectral shadow, doom-haunted.

Mills saw something else, even more terrifying in this silvery halflight than by day—whirling glitter of a thousand prisms, the rush of a huge, faceted globe hurtling through moonlit mist, the senseless plodding of Pastor—a shadow walking into the valley of shadows—the wail of a violin rising to a scream, half human.

The crystal globe paused for the merest fraction of a second.

Marcia screamed only once. Her hand was hot and dry in his as they fled down the hill, not daring to look back. But the crystal did not follow. Perhaps it had been too far away to sense their presence, for when Mills looked at the ridge the daggered horror was gone.

He prepared food for the two of them, and although neither was hungry, the commonplace ritual of eating calmed them, thrust back the memory of what had happened on the ridge into merciful semi-reality. But the latest radio-news sheets brought it back, starkly clear. Martial law had been declared in all large cities. Motor caravans and foot travelers fled in exodus from infested centers to regions whence the horror had preceded them.

Explosives had been found worse than useless, for flying shards of crystal expanded into new monsters whenever they struck a victim. Although a French artillery company had actually blown a Marsistal to bits with heavy shell-fire, against this solitary triumph stood the fact that there was not enough ammunition in existence to exterminate one half of that far-flung crystal horde, even had sufficient heavy cannon been available.

Tons of ordinary Marsistals had been

relinquished to the authorities and stored in bank vaults, concrete dugouts and the like. At one time it had been hoped that the crisis was past, that no new spheres would be reported.

Such hope was short-lived. Insatiable, the things fed so long as food was to be had, until they reached a diameter of about fifteen feet; then burst in a deadly explosion of crystal spears, any one of which, lodging in flesh, bristled into a new creature. Frequently the Marsistals burst on the very fringe of fleeing crowds. And for each thus self-destroyed by the necessity of their nature, ten or twenty new ones sprang up.

Mills put the tele-news sheets aside. Marcia's somber eyes questioned him. He told her all, from the death of Landers to his work—and failure—of the past hours.

"It was a wild, desperate hope," he confessed. "I thought Pastor might by chance be on the right track. But if detronite can't harm the things it isn't likely that sound or even ultra-sonic vibrations will. Maybe I'm looking for something that doesn't exist — maybe the Marsistals *can't* be destroyed."

"But you can't stop," she put in softly, "until you *know*. Oh Tony! There must be something, some overlooked facts."

"Facts?" he interrupted bitterly. "Twenty years haven't given us any real facts, except that they're alive, deadly—that they feed and move and interfere on our radiophone band——"

Arrested by a kindling spark of thought, he paused, then went on.

"It's when they move we get that interference, and to generate it there must be an electro-magnetic field, probably inside the crystals themselves. Maybe such a field works through their peculiar atomic structure to intensify the force of gravitation, as a burning-glass does sunlight, to make one side of them heavier than the other, and so set them rolling. They certainly don't move mechanically, as we do."

He rose to pace the room restlessly. "Supposing we could generate that field within the crystals ourselves, by using a tight beam transmitter and getting a resonance effect. If the theory holds water, we should be able to produce terrific gravitational strains within them, perhaps enough to break down even their structure. It's worth trying."

"Then let's try, Tony—and quickly, because there is so little time."

THEY worked right through the night. Analyzers trained upon that telltale "pee-whit, pee-whit" yielded their data.

"But I don't think it's accurate," Mills confessed. "We're getting a lot of interference beats that throw us off. The frequency we want is somewhere in this range, but how narrow its band is I can't tell."

Nevertheless he assembled a beam transmitter according to the data given. Toward morning he forced Marcia to withdraw and rest, promising to call her if there were news.

The transmitter finished, he laid the Marsistal from Pastor's cottage in one pan of a laboratory balance, focussed the transmitter upon it, and snapped the switch. Invisible, silent radiation sprang forth. Slowly he tuned the circuit over its entire range of frequencies.

He might as well have lit a candle for all the effect it had. The balance never wavered. That sparkling bit of alien life pendent in it seemed to glow defiantly. He shut off the transmitter, and became aware of Marcia, watching from a doorway.

"Tony! I couldn't sleep. Look!"

He nodded dully at sight of the tele-news sheets in her hand, too weary and soul-sick to wish to read them. "You may as well know, Marcia. It's no use. Maybe our guess just wasn't good enough. Even if it was, I can't build a transmitter to work

on a narrower band, and that's what we would need——"

She stared at him, fear tightening her mouth.

"You're not giving up, Tony! You can't!"

"Nothing more I can do." He was groggy, drunk with fatigue, his voice acid with hopelessness. "We'd have to hit the critical frequency within one or two cycles —months of work maybe. No, we're through."

She shook her head as though to shut out a persistent evil vision. "All of a sudden I'm afraid, Tony—terribly afraid!" Through fatigue-drugged senses warning reached him that she was on the verge of hysteria, that his grim ultimatum had left her faith foundationless. But before he could stop her she had flung the papers at his feet and run out of the door. Out into gray dawnlight he stumbled after her.

He stopped there, let her get farther away. At the observatory she would be safer than anywhere else. He had no safety to offer her—nor anything else, now. Any other time Marcia would have stood by him. But this wasn't just any time; this was a special hell on earth and everything was crumbling into black horror—everything that was or might have been.

She had almost reached the speedster when she stopped, stood poised in a stiff, unnatural attitude. Mills' breath froze in his throat and his heart seemed to stop beating, for he knew already what she saw. He knew that a Marsistal would come rolling ponderously down upon her in a moment.

When it came he was amazed at the grim swiftness of it—a thing gigantic, larger than he had yet seen. The monospeedster was in its way, and the Marsistal rolled through and over it, crushing the frail craft to earth, and unhindered swept downhill. Before it Marcia fled with all the glorious vigor of her young body, silently, saving her breath for flight. But the lead she had was fast dwindling.

Desperation sucked the strength from his limbs. Willing to give his life tenfold for hers, he knew this was no case for heroics, that rescue was humanly impossible, that even if he were to throw himself under the thing it would pause only an instant in its pursuit of her. One finish only to this race with death, unless—

He did not deceive himself. The chance was slender, but worth the playing. He shouted, made certain that Marcia was heading for the house—she didn't know, of course, that the sphere could roll walls down like so much *papier maché*. Then he sprang indoors and swung the beam transmitter around, facing the doorway.

MARCIA was two hundred feet from the porch when he grasped the small Marsistal gingerly by the edges, where it had grown no needles up to the time he had last examined it. That it might have grown new ones since was a chance he had to take, because this was no time for fussing delicately with tongs.

He jammed the thing into place before the little wire grid of the beam transmitter, where every iota of energy would have to pass through it. A wager for two lives, his slim supposition that the Marsistal's atomic structure might act as a natural screen or filter, that the transmitted energy would be so affected as to lie within that critical range of frequency peculiar to the crystals.

He flipped the switch just as Marcia reached the porch. The giant sphere was only fifty feet behind her then. What if the impressed field merely made it come on faster? What if it did nothing at all?

It did nothing at all, and Tony Mills, strangely cool and deliberate, began, turning the circuit from the very beginning of its range, uncertain whether he would ever finish that turn of the dials.

Suddenly the little Marsistal in the trans-

mission grid split with a sodden "thunk" and drifted down among the busbars as shimmering dust. Something happened to the monster sphere that same instant. It lurched, rocked backward, came to a grinding, quivering halt. It settled as though striving to force its bulk into the hard earth. Dirt shivered aside under its vibrating spears.

There was a sound, a sharp, tinkling death-rattle. Abruptly the crystal broke. The shards of it dropped to the accompaniment of that shrill, penetrating vibration. It disintegrated as though a charge of detronite had been exploded at its core, and every fragment crumbled still further as it fell.

Upon the ground, sparkling as with mica dust, lay a pulsing reddish-brown globe six inches in diameter, flattened by its own weight, flabby, repulsive. As though rehearsed, and without conscious thought, Mills knew what had to be done. From his laboratory he brought nitric acid. It hissed and bubbled as he poured it upon the globe. A stench arose. The throbbing ball dissolved into a puddle of steaming, frothy liquid. He emptied the bottle into it.

Then Marcia was in his arms, sobbing and unnerved now that all was past, and he shaking with fear of the fate that had passed her so closely by.

She pushed herself away from him at last, looked up at him with eyes in which pride and tears blended equally.

"We have to tell them now, Tony," she whispered. "There's a world waiting."

He turned to the radiophone and switched it on. No maddening "pee-whit, pee-whit" now. Silence but for a faint chatter of DX on some far-off channel—silence almost of death.

"It can't be too late!" he muttered. "Not now — when we can fight back! Not now——"

The selector bulb flashed into belated response. Dialing Federal Police, he added the emergency signal. A tired desk sergeant grunted routine acknowledgment.

"I have completely destroyed a Marsistal sphere," said Mills slowly. "Give me your commanding officer."

The man gasped comically, but made the desired connection. Within a minute Mills was speaking to a national chief. Within three he was addressing not one man, but a world-wide conclave of emergency police heads, army officers, and technicians. To them he explained succinctly what he had done, and how by a simple determination of the exact frequency transmitted by the small crystals at the instant they broke down, special transmitters working on that predetermined frequency could be built, to be effective without further use of small Marsistals.

Before he was allowed to leave the phone, technicians were already at work; the first step in a world-wide offensive against the crystal horde had been taken. Mills himself was ordered to Washington. For the following hour he and Marcia packed and set the laboratory in order.

At the end of that time a police plane droned to a landing outside. Five minutes later they were winging toward Washington, a grinning young police lieutenant at the controls.

THE plane's teletype rattled busily. From time to time the pilot passed back its curtly worded bulletins. The substance of them all was alike — news of humanity's drive against the dreaded spheres.

The first battery of transmitters, placed in action in Washington, had rid the capital of the spiked horrors. After a thirty-six hour reign of terror, the streets of that city were once more safe. London had won seven victories in isolated encounters with Marsistals, and was rushing construction of more transmitters. Panic was subsiding.

"I wouldn't be surprised, sir," said the

lieutenant gravely, "if there'll be quite a crowd at the landing-field. The people are wild with relief, and you can't blame them. You're the man of the hour, sir. Even befor I left, there was plenty of excitement."

He passed back more bulletins. The Marsistals were being conquered. Where the transmitters went, victory followed. London and Berlin were wiping out the spheres as fast as they could be found. Metropolitan New York had been cleared of the menace. No further casualties were being reported.

"That makes it certain, sir," continued the pilot. "The crowd at the landing-field, I mean. They were planning a parade when I left, with a reception to follow. I thought you might like to know."

Mills groaned. His muscles ached with fatigue and his eyes almost refused to stay open. The pilot's news made him wince in anticipation.

"Lieutenant!" said Marcia. "Do you know of a *long* way to Washington?"

The pilot considered gravely. "I've heard it's possible to go by way of Chicago, Miss. Of course I have my orders, but I was told to place myself at Colonel Mills' disposal. Your commission is waiting at Washington, sir. Any orders?"

"Yes!" retorted Mills, sinking deeper into the comfortable cabin chair and squeezing Marcia's hand. "Proceed to Washington—via Chicago. And don't hurry. You understand, Lieutenant?"

The pilot's head came around, but snapped instantly back to rigid attention ahead.

"Perfectly, sir. And—my congratulations!"

Inheritance

By SUDIE STUART HAGER

I'm grateful to people, a thousand years back,
Who let their minds run on a fanciful track—
Saw silver-winged fairies dance lightly in rain;
Heard witches conniving at trickery and pain;
Felt shivers when ogres, hobgoblins and gnomes
Shrieked nightly in forests or haunted their homes.

I, too, search for eggs Easter rabbits have laid,
And footprints where shy woodland brownies have played;
Deliciously shudder at Hallowe'en bats,
Great owls, with eyes flaming, and spitting, black cats.

Had all folk bequeathed things of practical need,
Oh, life would be prosy and meager indeed!

"He grasped his hammer and cut the outline of her foot."

Beyond the Frame

By MARIA MORAVSKY

Blazing office buildings struggled for a place in the frame with another, an older city of gilded spires and many-colored roofs. The past won.

HELENA WOLNA, a young Polish librarian in the Slavonic Department, sat at her desk, looking wistfully at an old painting.

The picture hung opposite a window overlooking a downtown square. The lights of a distant skyscraper were reflected in the glass protecting the canvas, and the torches of an ancient procession mingled with the reflection of electric lamps.

Helena looked at the painting, vague behind the shining glass, and saw the interposed images of the candle-lighted Polish cathedral and the blazing office buildings struggling for the place in the frame.

Impatiently she pulled the window-shade lower. Freed from the competition of the intruding reflection, the painting was revealed in all its alien beauty. Winged Hussars galloped on both sides of a gilded carriage, escorting a frail, very young girl to the cathedral. Their faces, sharply lighted by torches, were full of animation which had survived centuries.

All Helena knew about that fragment of her old country was gleaned from historical books. But she had a romantic obsession to see it. Her racial memory seemed to know the half-forgotten scene. . . .

The painting now seemed blurred. Perhaps the glass was covered with the vapor of the misty evening. She looked closer and saw with astonishment that the glass was missing altogether.

The ancient scene seemed now distant. A thick curtain of fog hung between it and the girl. Helena stretched her hands toward the dimmed figures, signalling them subconsciously to come nearer. . . . And then, the torches flickered.

The picture gradually became alive. The carriages moved farther and farther, then the galloping horses stopped suddenly. What had happened? Helena moved forward, peering through the fog.

Groping through the reddish darkness, she stumbled over something hard and thought without surprise that she was crossing the frame, the threshold behind which lay ancient life.

The dark frame broadened. Its inner edge stretched endlessly, expanding into a dark corridor with ashen walls, high ceiling and polished, slippery floor. Further and further she walked along this dark, subway-like tunnel with a misty opening at the end.

Further and further. . . . The opening broadened, the mist dispersed. At last she reached the end of the tunnel. A strong wind scented with strange memories blew into her face. The city of many colored tiled roofs and gilded spires shone in the distance, illuminated by the sun's afterglow triumphing over the fog. The evening was delayed, the torches looked pale.

Along the road leading to the glittering city hurried innumerable carriages, ox-carts, horsemen, and peasants in heavy-soled boots. Peacock feathers adorned their hats, bells jingled from their belts. Their women in ample billowing skirts sewn around with multicolored ribbons were like living rainbows.

They sang, laughed, gossiped.

"Is it true that King Jagiello has prom-

ised to baptize his people if our Krolewna marries him?"

"Oh, yes! They will be baptized in batches. They will step into the river, and the priests will pray over the water, to consecrate it. And then, after they have been sprinkled with holy water and given the names of our saints, each new Christian will be given a white shirt and a loaf of bread."

"Surely many of them would suffer baptism twice for that!"

It was the tipsy ox-cart driver who said the last words. A barefooted priest in dark brown habit belted with unbleached rope, who was being given a ride on the cart, shook his finger at the irreverent joker.

HELENA listened to the chatter with excited attention. She felt that in some vital way it concerned her.

"Krolewna Jadviga is coming to Crakow. She has been to the White Sisters, to ask for advice. They say she has at last decided to marry this barbarian king."

"He is all covered with hair, like a bear," they gossiped again.

"Her second name is Helena," someone said.

And then Helena realized that she was the expected princess. She looked at her clothes: they were strangely cut and rich. Even under the layer of dust she could see how shiny was the silk of her voluminous skirt and fur-edged bodice, how thick was the plush of her amaranthine mantle.

A passing knight looked at her, astonished, and swept the dusty road with the plume of his hat.

"How did you happen to stray here, Krolewna? Dare I offer you my horse?"

"I—my carriage broke down on the way to Crakow. I hated to disappoint my people waiting for me in the cathedral. I left my escort behind," she answered assuredly as if repeating a sentence heard many times.

"Your courtiers will worry, Krolewna."

"Let them worry!" she laughed lightly. "I am tired of their pomp."

The knight lifted her gently and placed her behind him on the richly ornamented saddle. Jadviga followed with her finger the fantastic design of beaten gold and asked:

"Where did you get this saddle? It seems to be of foreign design."

"Yes, it's Turkish. A dead pasha parted with it on my behalf." He laughed unpleasantly. There was a hint of murder in his laughter.

Jadviga recalled that war was the only business of knights. The fearless Hussars! It sounded well in chronicles, but to meet one was repulsive. Why, he boasted of robbing a dead man!

"I will never marry a knight!" she thought.

And then—she remembered. She was coming to Crakow, to marry the knight of knights . . . the King of Lithuania had promised to unite his country with the Polish kingdom, and Jadviga, who had inherited the throne of her father, was the seal of that promise. How could she, even for a brief moment, forget that?

Yet it seemed to her that the event had been kept in oblivion for centuries. . . . She made an effort to remember why she had forgotten. But her mind was confused about the past. Or was it—future?"

She had a queer feeling of racing through the centuries. The epochs mingled so. . . . Were there any Hussars at the time of Jagiello? Certainly not. Nor had the Turks yet ventured to set their feet in Europe. Yet she heard the swish of the great cavalry wings designed to terrify the heathens from Asia; she saw the enormous pinions of eagle feathers hovering over Poland, casting their gigantic shadows over the country's future, while she rode backward, toward its past.

Her mind was in a whirl. Her head

ached under the heavy headgear. She lifted her hand to her burning forehead and saw on her finger a ring of darkened gold; it blazed with a crudely cut diamond. Yes, she was bethrothed.

Her mind became mercilessly clear on that point. She was engaged to be married to that huge Lithuanian of whom people said that his body was all covered with hair like that of a bear. How disgusting! She wanted to weep.

But she remembered her dignity; people must not see her crying. The horse had already galloped through the gate leading to the cathedral.

SOMEONE recognized her in spite of the blurred light of the torches, again enveloped by the mist and the deepening dark. A voice shouted:

"Long live Jadviga!"

And the echo awakened among the solid stone walls of the cathedral mimicked faintly:

" . . . live Jadviga! . . ."

Yet she did not feel the joy of living. She seemed to be going through a painful dream erroneously called life.

"Jagiello will be here before the evening mass, to welcome you, Jadviga."

She did not notice who said it; her attention was attracted by the sound of a hammer.

"Who is working here so late? Does not all work cease at sunset?"

The knight who had brought her answered, helping her to dismount from his restless horse:

"A few stone-cutters had to work at night, to complete repairs on the cathedral. It must be ready for your marriage ceremony."

She followed the sound of hammers. It seemed persistent and appealing like a signal sent out by someone very dear. . . . At the farthest end of the cathedral she saw a light-haired lad replacing a stone in the wall broken by cannon. In the wavering torchlight his hair shone like pale gold.

His face was poignantly familiar to her. Somewhere, centuries ago, she had seen those dreamy gray eyes with their tinge of cobalt blue around the pupils. . . . She loved to see them, centuries ago . . . or was it centuries ahead?

"What a ridiculous thought!" she mused.

"Tell me your name," she asked the lad.

Before answering, he bent low and wiped his eyes with his sleeve. Only then she noticed that the boy was crying.

"Why do you cry?" she asked gently.

Her escort was shocked by her talking to a commoner. The surrounding crowd was gaping with astonishment at the unusual scene; a Krolewna conversing with a plain stone-cutter.

The boy hesitated. Then he looked up and their eyes met. As if compelled by a force stronger than his will, he blurted out:

"My father is ill. He upset a *tigel* in which he was melting metal, in search of the element of Truth. He is a great alchemist, you know. He scorched himself with molten metal. I am too poor to call in the king's healer. Others can't help him. So I am working at nights to earn enough. . . . . But he may die before I am able. . . ."

He did not finish the sentence. Startled, with his mouth open, he watched Jadviga put her little foot on the stone which he was fixing. The light of many torches flashed on its diamond buckle. Krolewna forced the buckle off her slipper and handed it to the boy.

"Take this—for your father."

The boy looked at her with mute gratitude. When she stepped off the dusty stone, he grasped his hammer and cut in the outline of her foot, which had left its mark on the dust.

"Let the mark of your good deed live for centuries!" he exclaimed, pointing to the deep cut.

As their eyes met once more, these two realized that the most common of all miracles had happened; love blossomed out. And, with overwhelming joy, came instantly the withering realization that the flower would not be permitted to live; Jadviga-Helena had to marry the king.

The amaranthine flags of Poland, redder than blood and brighter than flame, fluttered in the breeze that smelled of burning pine. Their gilded tassels sparkled in the light of the gay bonfires started on the streets. Men in embroidered *sukmanas* and girls aflutter with ribbons crowded around them. The cymbalists of Lithuania and the pipers of Crakow tried to outdo one another making as loud as possible their simple melancholy music. Presently their tinkling was drowned in the roar of horns welcoming the king. It was a gay sound marking the beginning of the feasts and holiday-making, but for Jadviga it sounded like the trumpets of Judgment Day.

A GREAT crowd of strange-looking people with whitish hair, pale yellow skin, and powerful bodies standing knee-deep in the waters of the winding river. . . . Jadviga could hear the murky water swishing between their bare, hairy legs. The dignified priests in gold-embroidered *ornaty*, praying aloud under the cold gray skies. . . . The solemn ceremony of baptism. . . . The sun bursting suddenly through a heavy cloud, with its rays almost tangible, streaming down like the strings of a great harp reaching from sky to earth. . . . The murmurs:

"Miracle! Miracle!"

She saw and heard it all in the detached, lonely way of one peeping unseen at a stranger's feast. So a departed soul may look at the body it has deserted. She saw herself, as in a mirror, standing beside a stocky, broad-shouldered man in shining armor, with a great white eagle painted on his gilded shield.

"He puts on his armor even on holidays. He is suspicious, always ready for war," she reflected.

She looked at him long and hard like a tamer at a beast he has to break. But when he returned her gaze, she wavered. Was not the burden too great? Uniting kingdoms was not a woman's task.

Jagiello was bored with the too long ceremony. He yawned openly, disclosing his big, wolfish teeth.

Jadviga felt that she had a request to make. What was it? With an effort of one recalling an incident of remote childhood, she said:

"That stone-cutter . . . do you remember the stone-cutter from the cathedral?"

"The one to whom you gave your diamond buckle? Yes, people told me about your extravagance, my queen."

She looked up into his somber eyes. There was a flicker of amusement in them. No, he was not angry, just mocking. . . . Taking heart, she continued:

"His father died. It is a pity; the old man was a sage. Had he lived a little longer, mayhap he would have discovered the Philosopher's Stone."

"I and my people have but little need of philosophy," Jagiello said sourly. "These alchemists are often dangerous sorcerers. What about his son?"

"Waclaw wants to get work at the court."

"Not while I live! He knows how to cut figures for tombstones, yes? By Perun, none of our family needs one yet!"

"Please, do not swear by the pagan gods," Jadviga admonished him gently.

IN THE spacious roof garden of Jagiello's palace, shaded by great trees brought on enormous platforms all the way from a Lithuanian forest, Helena-Jadviga lay in her silken hammock, listening to the confused melodies of distant violins and accordions. There was a carnival crowd danc-

ing on the market place, celebrating the old pagan holiday disguised by Christianity as Easter.

She was infinitely sad and lonely, not because her king was away fighting the savagely religious Teutons, but because he was to return soon.

He would return and then—the services of the flaxen-haired falcon-keeper would prove dangerous. . . .

"What is troubling you, my *pani?*" she heard the caressing voice.

"Can't you guess what it is?" She gave him an eloquent look.

"To disperse this sadness, may I read you aloud from Slowacki?"

She rose from her hammock, startled beyond words. The boy mentioned the poems which were not yet born, the genius whose soul still wandered through the shadowy valleys of the future.

As if hearing her thoughts, her lover answered them:

"We are predestined to meet always . . . both in the past and the future. . . ."

MOONLIT mists scented with fading violets of late spring. . . . Distant shoutings of the celebrating crowds. . . . The clanging of bells and the roaring of horns. . . . And, dominating all the scents and sounds, the aroma of the boy's hair and the mocking sound of his indiscreet kisses. . . .

The king's return. . . . A hooded falcon handed to the falcon-keeper. And then—the terror! *That* terror!

"Do you know how to care for the birds? How long have you been here? I never saw you before!" Jagiello's hoarse voice was asking, his hairy fingers drumming over the gilded shield protecting his broad chest.

"I—I have been serving in the palace for two—no, for three years," he stammered.

"Ah! So you must know all my birds. Undoubtedly, you know their ways. You know that they will attack a stranger. . . . Now, my faithful falcon-keeper, will you take the hood off this one?"

The fierce bird flying at the boy. . . . The swish of its wings, so loud, so unbearably loud, reminiscent of the great pinions of the Winged Hussars. . . . And then, a hank of blood-stained golden hair torn out of the beloved head.

"Ha! Ha! I remember you cutting stones in the churchyard at Crakow! I'll give you time to cut a stone for your grave!"

Darkness. . . . The bloody mists swimming under the trees of the artificial garden. . . . It seemed that the roof of the palace would break under the weight of the rich fat mold taken from the fertile fields of Sandomir, to grow the parasitic flowers in the king's paradise.

YEARS later, lying in her chamber decorated only with the crucifix and the *obraz* of the virgin, the sick wife of King Jagiello remembered the stone-cutter whom she had tried to force out of her heart by fasting, prayers and good deeds. Her tired soul, stripped of its earthly cravings, longed now for but one look into his gray-blue eyes.

"Send for Waclaw," she whispered to her old servant who bent to straighten her pillows.

The old woman looked at her with compassion. Had the queen forgotten that the boy had died long ago?

"Waclaw does not live in your kingdom any longer," she said, making the sign of the cross.

But Jadviga-Helena would not believe it.

"He promised to wait for me—he promised." Her bloodless lips murmured unconsciously the suddenly remembered words of a strange poem:

"We shall forget we ever died . . ."

She paused, trying to remember the

queer lines. They were in a foreign language, not in Polish.

"My love will meet me on the shore
And he will lead me by the hand . . ."

She asked herself the meaning of the foreign sentences which sung themselves out of her inner self. But she could only repeat:

"We shall forget we ever died . . ."

Oh, for one look into his eyes! She must, she would find him waiting beyond the walls of this stuffy chamber!

She thought that she could move. It seemed to her that she rose from her bed and was groping toward the door. But it was only her soul which moved away from the heavy and motionless body tied by mortal disease to the bearskin-covered bed.

She passed through the heavy oak door, between the brass-wrought bars which crossed its polished planks. She walked with unearthly light steps across the cobbled court of her castle, past the armor-clad sentinels, out of the iron gate, beyond the lowered bridge, farther and farther, toward the end of the city where the dusty road led from its suburbs to the ancient wall.

Dim light shone through the slit in the wall. She glanced through it. Strange how thick the wall became! The slit stretched endlessly, expanding into a corridor with ashen walls and polished slippery floor.

"An underground passage!" thought Queen Jadviga.

At the end of the tunnel there was an opening. It grew broader and broader, myriads of starry lights shone at the end of it. A strange steady light, unlike the torches and candles, a hundred times stronger. Yet it was not the light of the stars. It was lamps shining from hundreds of windows of a mammoth building. A skyscraper!

As if through a fog, she heard someone asking:

"Are you in charge of this library?"

SHE rubbed her eyes. A young man stood at her desk. The gentle foreign slurring of syllables gave his voice the quality of a caress. His Slavic high cheek-bones, softly outlined mouth, round chin, flaxen hair, seemed incongruous with his American clothes.

Dreamy gray eyes with a tinge of cobalt blue on the outer fringe of the iris looked deeply into hers, and she heard the bells of the ancient cathedral chiming with sad sweetness, proclaiming the unforgettable hour. They both knew, at first meeting, the thrilling sadness of things to come and things which had passed long ago.

"I am Jan Groholski," the visitor introduced himself. "I was directed here by an art dealer."

Unable to speak, Helena motioned him to a chair. For a while, they sat opposite each other, sharing the same strange tumult. . . . The young Pole said:

"I sat here for a long time watching you dream in front of that picture. Did you—do you ever have the feeling that you saw the same person and surroundings long, long ago?"

She nodded. He turned to the picture, with the unspoken implication.

"This painting was in our family for generations. I remember it as a boy. It hung in the music room, in our Warsaw home. But my grandfather was so poor, he had to sell it. A wealthy American connoisseur bought it. Now that I somewhat prospered here——"

She thought that she understood.

"You want to buy it back? But you can't, you know. It's public property—the library's administration won't sell."

"Yes, I know. Now that it belongs to the public library I don't mind. I'm perfectly satisfied to leave it here. But I'd like to copy it. Just a sketch. . . . May I?"

"Why, of course," the girl said unsteadily. The impact of this strangely familiar meeting left her shaken.

The young artist opened his portfolio and took out a kind of stylus.

"I'll do it in silver point," he explained.

"What is silver point?"

"A drawing made with the sharpened end of a silver stick. It leaves marks which oxidize. They are much finer than any pencil can make. The drawback is that it can't be erased. You have to draw it right the first time."

Even as he spoke, he drew rapidly, frowning. For a while Helena watched his slim hand move along the rough paper. Suddenly he tore the sheet in two.

She gave a little outcry of dismay.

"It did not look right to me," he explained. "I'll try it again."

This time it pleased him better. The girl in the bridal carriage and her convoy of winged hussars looked clearer. Yet again the artist shook his head and tore the sheet.

"I don't seem to get it." He looked about the emptying room. "Are you going to close?"

The librarian looked at the clock.

"I may close a little later," she decided. She had to see that drawing completed.

The last visitor left. It was long past closing time. But Helena still watched silently the quickly moving hand.

Now the artist raised his darkened, troubled eyes, and looked searchingly into her face.

"I abandoned the idea of copying the whole picture. I'm just sketching that furthest plane of it. . . . It seems somewhat obscure, but it may clarify. . . . Yes!" he cried so that he startled her. "It *is* clarifying!" In a low tone, almost in a whisper, he added: "Almost against my will. . . ."

She bent over the sketch and saw, not the girl in the bridal carriage, not the Winged Hussars on its sides, but that unforgettable scene by the cathedral, with the young stone-cutter chiseling the outline of Queen Jadviga's small foot.

Again centuries melted away. The pale gray lines of silver point seemed to scintillate, taking on some unearthly light. She looked closer into the queen's face, and it was almost like her own reflection in the mirror.

Slowly, with bated breath, she transferred her gaze to the other face, the suffering yet exalted features of the young stone-cutter, just outlined by the visitor. She looked at it for ages, as the library clock loudly ticked away mere seconds. It was the face of Jan Groholski.

Sudden lightning from the electric storm lit up the sky. And in that brief, dazzling light, she saw a glimpse of the future.

She could not see the details. But one indelible impression remained: Jan and herself bound forever together, by a link of timeless destiny.

It Happened to Me

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THREE FLOWERS

By F. T. COMPTON

JUST before they closed the coffin on my sister, Lucille, in our little church I placed three flowers in her hand—three white roses from the bush in our front yard. It was the last earthly thing I could do for Lucille, for she had loved the roses very much.

But those roses have haunted me for years and are haunting me now. You see, after Lucille died—and she was only nineteen, a pitifully young age to die—there were only three of us left. My older sister, Nina, and my brother, Arthur, who was also a few years older than I, and, of course, myself. We had no other relatives that we knew of.

It was years before the roses, as I say, began haunting me. Then one night fifteen years after Lucille's death I had a dream. I could see a small vase in the middle of a white-covered table and in the vase were three white roses. I could see nothing else. Just the table, the vase, and the three flowers. And one of the roses, I noticed, was wilted. The other two appeared fresh.

I woke with a start. I don't know why, but I did. For a long time I lay there puzzling. Then my mind groped backward through the years to the three roses I had pressed into my dead sister's hand.

Now I wasn't given to any ideas about premonitions or that sort of thing—no, I wasn't at the time. But next morning I received the news that my sister, Nina, had died of a heart attack during the night!

THREE years passed and I had all but forgotten the dream when it occurred again, only this time it was in a slightly different form. This time I could see the same white-covered table, and the same small vase, but in the vase there were only two white roses—one fresh and one *wilted*.

Again I awoke and my mind recalled the other instance in which I had dreamed of the roses. There had been two fresh roses and a wilted one then. And, I thought with a mixture of fear and scoffing, if that dream *were* prophetic the wilted rose had represented poor Nina. The wilted one in this instance must represent Arthur or me!

Ridiculous! I scoffed. Called myself a fool! Yet the remainder of the night was sleepless for me.

Come morning, and I hurried down to Arthur's office. He wasn't there, although it was already past his hour of arrival. I learned that he had driven out of town late the preceding afternoon on business

and had meant to return, probably late that night.

Time passed and I grew frantic. Still, hours later, there was no Arthur. I gave up. He was dead. I *knew* it! Just as clearly as I knew it later when a pale-faced boy informed me that he had found Arthur's body in the ruins of the car that had gone over the edge of one of our mountainous roads the night before.

Prophetic? The dream could have been coincidence once. But could it have been such twice? I firmly believe that the first wilted rose had represented Nina. The second, Arthur. If that is true I can believe that the third rose represents myself, can I not?

Somewhere in my subconscious, or wherever it is dreams store themselves, there is a vision of a white-covered table, a small vase, and a single white rose that is wilted.

Each night I pray that that particular vision will not be called from the limbo of dreams and other shadows for many, many years yet.

THE CAST-AWAY SLAVE

By THOMAS TRAFTON

THIS is the history of a dream, or perhaps it wasn't a dream! Two years ago, while I was still in school, I was in the habit of lying down to take a brief nap after returning from three o'clock classes. One day, I believe it was in March, while I was napping in this manner I had a dream so vivid with its attendant incidents that I recorded an account of it in a small note-book.

I seemed to awaken wet to the skin upon a sandy beach. I was dressed in the manner of sailors 150 years ago; which fact didn't seem strange to me. Vaguely, I seemed aware of shipwreck in a violent storm.

After walking some distance down a nearby road of sorts, I came upon a colorful procession of three donkeys led by a squat, broad, thickly-muscled Negro. Two of the animals bore large, covered jars slung along their sides; the third carried a fat, dark, greasy-skinned individual having a fishy gleam in his eye. Both men wore clothes giving an Arab effect.

I smiled, said a cheery "Good morning," and started to ask a few pertinent facts about my whereabouts. They stopped, looked at each other, looked at me, then back at each other. They spouted some outlandish gibberish between themselves. Then the Negro advanced, apparently to inspect me. He began prodding and pinching me painfully here and there. When I rather roughly pushed him away he presented a sharp, pointed, slightly curved knife at my throat. This situation was rapidly becoming unpleasant and even dangerous to me. I grasped his wrist and threw him over my shoulder with what is known in the wrestling world as a "flying mare." In doing this, however, *his knife slashed my left knee.* I was more than holding my own with this Negro when my world exploded into a million, incandescent, hurtling fragments. I had temporarily forgotten the Syrian, for such he on the donkey's back apparently was. Dazedly, I recall walking with this caravan for a great distance. As my hands were tied behind my back, I was powerless to do anything in the way of escaping. Soon the road blurred and danced before my eyes; then came a blank blackness in which I don't remember a thing.

When I awakened I had a strange, dizzy feeling in my head; the whole room seemed to be swaying literally about me. Now comes one of the incidents I mentioned:

Although there were no sharp points or projections on or near the couch upon which I could have cut myself, *on my left knee was a two-inch gash* which had been bleeding freely. I still have a scar there.

Now for the other incident: In the summer of that year, 1938, I went to Los Angeles to visit my paternal grandmother. She had moved to California before I was old enough to remember. While I was there she showed me a very old, framed letter. It said in a quaint, old script and with peculiar spelling:

"Cadiz, November the 6, 1778, on board the *Lively*. Honored Father and Mother, I have taken this opportunity to let you know that I'm now bound to Charlestown and shall come home as soon as possible. I hope these lines will find you in good health as they leave me at present. I have not heard from you these three years and more, but hope to see you in five months or less. I have but just got out of Barbary and run away from Gibraltar and come to Cadiz in Spain. I was cast away upon the coast of Barbary and was a slave there 19 months and 12 days and was given up (by) the King of Morocco to the English Counsel—13 of us. I have but (the) desire to be remembered to all friends, that is those alive.

"Thomas Trafton."

Incidentally, I learned that the writer of the letter was my grandfather's grandfather and that his name and mine are one and the same.

Now this account may be fantastic and unbelievable to you, and I think it strange myself. But—*it happened to me.*

RABBIT'S INTUITION

By JIM PRICE

THIS strange experience happened to me just a few days after I had got married. I was on my way home from work one night. It was an exceptionally dark night and I was in a hurry to get home to my wife. I had made a special trip to the bank to get enough money to fix our home up in comfort.

I was driving a buggy at the time. Being in a great hurry I decided to take the shorter road. When I came to the turning off point, I was surprised to see a rabbit sitting up in the middle of the road. The horses racing down on it did not seem to frighten it a bit. It just sat there in the middle of the road, quite unconcerned.

I intended to go straight ahead, but when the buggy started to pass the rabbit and go the shortest road home, the rabbit jumped up and raced ahead of the buggy.

It ran up ahead and stopped again in the middle of the road ahead of the horse. This had me very puzzled and I stopped for a minute. The rabbit just sat there and stared at me. When I started the horses again the rabbit ran ahead again and stopped as it had before in front of the buggy.

When I stopped this time it turned around and ran back the other way a bit and stopped again and seemed to be waiting for me to turn back. Finally I turned around and followed the rabbit. He turned down the road that was the longest route to my home. I followed him until I was halfway home, then he turned and ran into the bushes.

I went on home that night. The next morning a friend told me about a band of men that had held up and robbed him on the way home the night before. If I had kept on the road I first started on, they would have held me up and got all the money I had in the world.

Corpses and Chalices

IN THIS issue of WEIRD TALES we introduce two writers very well known in other fields, but new to our readers. H. Bedford-Jones is, of course, one of the outstanding writers of fiction appearing in the magazines today. His name is known to readers of SHORT STORIES, *Adventure, The American Weekly, Blue Book,* all the writers' magazines and wherever people look for readable fiction. His association with this office goes back many years, and it is a memory of a certain series of stories that appeared under his name in SHORT STORIES that led to a correspondence which produced the stories of a Professional Corpse which will be coming along in WEIRD TALES. The next one of this series, by the way, is called *The Blind Farmer and the Strip Dancer* — we feel that the title alone ought to arouse your interest, and the story is just as good. B-J is not a prolific correspondent; his letters are apt to say: "Dear Mac: Here's a story. Yours, H.B.J." Actually that's all we need. The printer and our readers can do all the rest.

The other writer new to WT is Frank Gruber, author of *The Golden Chalice.* Mr. Gruber has had a very varied career. It began in Minnesota, continued in the army for a period—where he says he was the worst soldier, but far from the worst crap-shooter—led him to construction camps, the publishing business—by way of poultry journals—and several other activities. His real interest is in writing, however, and he is the author of many magazine stories, creator of a successful movie character, Oliver Quade, and lately has been appearing regularly on best mystery seller lists with his book, *The French Key,* which won honorable mention in the Mary Roberts Rinehart detective story contest. In the course of a conversation one day, Mr. Gruber mentioned that he had written a short story that was in the weird category—and we didn't let him get out of the office until he had promised to let us read it. And here it is in this issue of your magazine.

Seabury Quinn

PRACTICALLY all the letters received in our office say, sooner or later, that the writers are devotees of Seabury Quinn. Not a bad comment on any writer, it seems to us. We are glad therefore, to have his novelette *The Gentle Werewolf* in this issue of WEIRD TALES where modern stories are so well represented by Gruber and Bedford-Jones. We hope to have plenty more Quinn in this magazine.

Why "It Happened to Them"

IN THE last issue of WEIRD TALES we printed three personal experiences under the heading of "It Happened to Me." These drew quite a few letters from readers, among others a very interesting one from Mr. Howard Brenton MacDonald, of New York City, who has an M.A. and F.R.G.S. after his name and describes himself as lecturer, author and traveller. We print Mr. MacDonald's letter in full, his opinions and suggestions being of course, entirely his own.

"WEIRD TALES readers may be interested in explanations, according to the occult teach-

ings, of the three personal experiences recounted in the May issue.

"In the first case Mr. Gary is attracting those bullets by his own inner attitude. Haunted by the spectacle of a man shot to death before his eyes and worried by the dreams predicting his own death in this manner, he formed a deep-seated mental picture in his subconscious which is influencing events around him. The Yogis teach that 'you get that to which you are inwardly attuned,' sooner or later. Already Mr. Gary has thus 'attracted,' through the power of the subconscious mind, two bullets; and unless he changes his inner attitude very radically, very soon, the third bullet will arrive and kill him. However, if he would honestly try to replace this deep-seated worry and certainty of death by a bullet with a positive picture of a long life free from all harm there is still a chance that the third bullet may not reach him.

"The case of Carma Millard's husband deals with an earthbound Astral Body. Occultists tell us that at death our Ego leaves the physical body but carries with it the Astral Body and, at times, some of the higher mental principles. The Astral Body is an exact counterpart of the Physical Body, only it is composed of much finer materials and is only visible to people possessing clairvoyance or advanced occult powers. Occasionally this Astral Body will not disintegrate for several weeks or months but will remain near its former earthly haunts, as did the mysterious girl in white in this experience. Egos imprisoned in such earthbound Astral Bodies often fail to realize that they are indeed dead, and so attempt to communicate with friends or relatives in familiar places, just as this girl did in the Cocoanut Grove; but they can only be seen or talked to by some mortal of unusual psychic power such as Evan Millard obviously possessed without understanding it. There is nothing unusual, either, according to the occult teachings, about the fact that Mr. Millard believed he had met and known this girl somewhere before; for undoubtedly his Ego had been associated with her in some past incarnation. And because of this strong former attachment it was only logical that he should want to rejoin her, and to accomplish this it is entirely possible that he simply 'wished' himself 'out of the body,' or died voluntarily by an action of the will alone, when he finally realized that this mysterious girl was actually dead. Of course all of this is a terrific burden for Mrs. Millard at the present time; but if she can bring herself to realize that neither the 'ghost' of the girl nor her husband was guilty of any 'crime' but were simply drawn to each other in this rather unusual manner through the workings of the great Law of Karma, perhaps she can become reconciled to her loss. I sincerely hope so.

"The third experience is simply an example of what the occultists call 'Astral Projection.' There are hundreds, or perhaps thousands, of similar cases known to students of psychic phenomena. What happens is that the Ego and the Astral Body leave the physical body temporarily, while the physical body is still living, and literally 'fly off into space' for a time and then return to the physical body, unharmed. Many advanced occultists and Yogis have the ability of projecting themselves, or their Astrals, at will; but more often such experiences come unexpectedly to persons who have psychic powers without realizing it. This is what happened to the friend of Caroline Evans. To materially minded people such a story as this may seem silly; but to an occultist it is a well recognized happening, easily explained. Neither Miss Evans or her friend need have the slightest alarm over this for such Astral Flights have no bad effects upon a person who understands their cause."

Unseen Forces

From Pittsfield, Massachusetts, Betty V. Browne writes: "Your magazine, which thrilled me when I read it as a child, has come back into my life again and I anxiously await each new issue, eager to enjoy its many unique and beautifully written stories.

"In an age when there is so much trashy literature on the market, it is indeed refreshing to find one periodical which adheres unflinchingly to its policy of printing tales of literary merit as well as intense interest to those interested in psychic phenomena. I am an X-ray technician and have published several technical papers, but even those of us engaged in scientific fields can realize that potent forces are unseen and unfathomed."

There Will be a Dorothy Quick Story Next Time

Vera Bagley writes from Chicago, Illinois: "Although I have been reading WEIRD TALES for over six years, this is the first time I've gathered courage enough to express my enthusiasm for your fine magazine. I honestly believe yours is the only one on the market of really weird and bizarre fiction.

"Your splendid staff of writers is always pleasing, and I certainly would hesitate to pick any particular one as being my favorite. Their stories have been so uniformly good, that few, indeed, have not reached WT's high standard. However, I must confess a weakness for Seabury Quinn. I should like Mr. Quinn to know how very much I have always enjoyed his lovely weird stories, especially those of medieval times.

"By the way, what has happened to Clifford Ball, and his Raid? He was a most likeable rogue. And Dorothy Quick, why has she been absent so long a time? If possible, let us have more of her, please. More of Hannes Bok would be very nice. I must say that he is an up and coming young man and hope to see a great deal of him in the future.

"Goodness, I nearly forgot my one complaint! Why do we wait so long between issues?"

THE BLACK ART

From its Birth to Blackout

MANY of you readers have written in and told us the kind of weird subjects that you like to see in the fiction pages of WEIRD TALES. Vampires, werewolves, weirdly scientific fiction, these are all favorites. And witchcraft—well . . .

. . . Witchcraft is—literally—as old as the hills. But the particular brand that blazed a trail of fire, torture and execution from Scotland to Massachusetts — climbing to an all time persecution high in the sixteen and seventeen hundreds—was spawned in England more than a thousand years before.

Way back in the Fourth Century, Christianity began to edge Paganism out of England's religious picture—but thousands still remained faithful to the old Gods and Goddesses. Although the new religion had annexed their temples, there continued in glades and caverns and secret hollows of the hills, the rites of Diana, Janus, Hecate, and the terrible witch goddess Erictho.

In its earlier stages, witchcraft was a religious organization, having rites and services very similar to the Christianity of those times. It was not evil then. Through the centuries that followed, however, the old Gods were gradually forgotten, and witchcraft evolved into an entirely Anti-Christ "religion."

They were souls in revolt with a vengeance, these witches, dedicating themselves to the Devil—whom they worshipped as God—and co-opting the Powers of Darkness in a war to the death with the Saints and Angels. From fanatical Dianists, they had by the year One Thousand grown into fanatical devil worshippers.

Their fearful ceremonies, initiations and Sabbaths crawled the whole slimy gamut of formulae for nauseating bric-a-brac, from the fat of grave-robbed babies to murderers' fingernails; they said the Lord's Prayer backwards, dressed up as animals, cast spells and the Evil Eye, stuck pins in wax and leaden images—and strove in every conceivable and inconceivable way to destroy their enemies.

Witches had their own midwives, their chore being the dedication of babies to Satan. And adult witches were baptised at the initiation services with such titles as "Thief of Heaven" and "Devil's Whelp." So powerful did the witches become, in their influence over the peoples, that the Church, which had at first inflicted only minor penances, decreed that all "Black Artists" should wholly perish.

Witchcraft was now a rubbish heap for worn out creeds; and the bonfires became the most efficient method of all time for rubbing out one's enemies, for once you were so much as suspected—your fat "was in the fire!"

In Central Europe, often as many as twenty percent of a city's population was burnt for witchcraft during the course of twelve months. High and low, old and young and even babies were fed to the flames. In this country, they were hanged and burned in droves, and Spain, France, Italy—every "civilized" country became an inferno that Dante would have envied.

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WE often have requests for back issues of WEIRD TALES. We list below such numbers as are available. If you would like to obtain any of these issues write us—WEIRD TALES, 9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y. The price is 25c a copy up to and including August, 1939. All after that date, 15c a copy.

1928—August, October, November and December.

1929—March, May and June.

1931—April-May only.

1932—Jan., Feb., June, Aug., Sept., Oct., November.

1933—Jan., Feb., March, May, July, Aug., Nov., Dec.

1934—All except January.

1935—All.

1936—All (Aug. and Sept. combined).

1937—All except January.

1938—All.

witchcraft a very definite back number, but even today in remote parts of this and other countries there still remain some believers in witches and their craft. And who are we to say that during other centuries, there did not exist—in a dim "once upon a time"—sciences as powerful as the wonders of 1940?

DR. CYCLOPS (Paramount)

WE happened to see a preview the other day of the film "Dr. Cyclops." It was an interesting experience, and we think that WEIRD TALES readers will also find it so when the picture comes their way.

Imagine being suddenly reduced in size to 13½ inches. That's what happens to five people who attempt interference with the plans of Dr. Cyclops—mad scientist who plans world domination through the power that his discovery of the secret of matter will bring him.

The doctor decides to make them "look small"—and he succeeds so well that the five unfortunates wake up to find themselves dressed in pocket handkerchiefs. From here the story develops thrillingly, with the mad doctor as some fiendish Gulliver in a war to the death with five desperate Lilliputians.

The picture is in technicolor. Albert Dekker takes the part of Dr. Cyclops, and Janice Logan is the scientific and very efficient heroine. "Dr. Cyclops" is altogether a very exciting affair, and one that I think you will really enjoy.

WEIRD TALES CLUB
9 Rockefeller Plaza, New York, N. Y.

WE HAVE had various suggestions for making this club a success, and it seems that most of our readers favor a correspondence club for the exchange of ideas about weird matters of all kinds. So we plan to set aside a special space for the WEIRD TALES CLUB in each issue; in it we shall print the most interesting letters from members—and also publish a list of the names and addresses of all those who write in for membership.

So, if YOU want to become a member of

the WEIRD TALES CLUB, just write us. We shall be happy to enroll you on the club roster, and to print your name and address in the magazine. In this way we hope that you and all W. T. C. members will discover mutually interesting pen-friends, and that the publication of names and ideas will be helpful for all those of you who want to form their own branches of the WEIRD TALES CLUB.

WEIRD TALES CLUB
9 Rockefeller Plaza
New York City, N. Y.

Allow me to add my plea for a WEIRD TALES CLUB to those you have already received. I suggest that the club be a national one sponsored by the WEIRD TALES Magazine. And that an appropriate emblem be adopted so that members may readily recognize each other in strange places.

By organizing a national club it will be possible for individuals to join where it is impossible to form a local club.

Of course you will publish a list of all club members who wish to correspond with others.

Please consider this letter as an application for charter membership in the proposed club.

John Haliburton.
564 S. Blvd., Norman, Oklahoma.

New Members

Mrs. Joseph Brafa, 1613 St. Paul Street, Baltimore, Md.

Bart Reagan, 903 Bryn Mawr Rd., Uptown Station, Pittsburgh, Pa.

Douglas Robinson, 2 Conestoga Rd., Garrett Hill, Penna.

Mrs. Doris A. Currier, 49 Dell Avenue, Lakeport, N. H.

Robert Lee Brothers, Gonzales, Texas.

Louise F. Avery, 776 Ostrom Avenue, Syracuse, N. Y.

Blair Moffett, 340 Powell Rd., Springfield, Pennsylvania.

Ralph Rayburn Phillips, The Bhuddist Brotherhood of America, 423 S. E. 69th Avenue, Portland, Oregon.

Franklin Bristol, Victoria 100-21, Mexico City, Mexico.

Richard H. Jamison, Valley Park, Missouri.

George M. Aylesworth, Box 508, Mackinaw City, Michigan.

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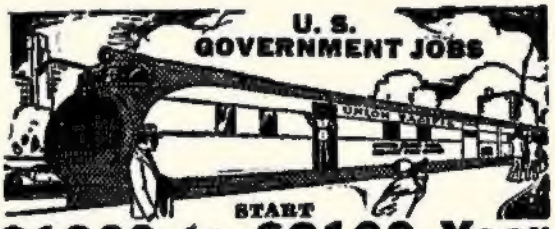

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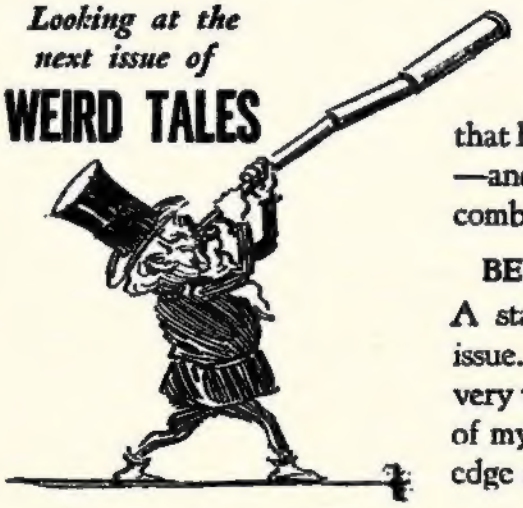

FORCES from the unknown descending upon the earth —the evil of the centuries that had lain waiting above the clouds —and men of science girding for combat.

BEYOND THE UNKNOWN

A startling novelette leads our next issue. It is by a man whose stories are very well known to readers of the sort of mystery tales that keep you on the edge of your chair—

ROBERT H. LEITFRED

A newcomer to **WEIRD TALES**—and a very welcome one.

And here are further advance flashes on some of the highlights of the next issue of **WEIRD TALES.**

Number two in Bedford-Jones' Adventures of a Professional Corpse is the BLIND FARMER AND THE STRIP DANCER—another assignment with death for the man to whom dying is all in the day's work. It's even more exciting than the ARTIFICIAL HONEY-MOON. Incidentally, Bedford-Jones got the idea for the Professional Corpse stories from an advertisement that actually appeared.

SEA BORN, by Edmond Hamilton, is another grand story scheduled for September. This tale is about a boy who is able to live both above and below water—and tells of his longing to rejoin the undersea folk to whom he really belongs.

That well-known fictioneer, Dorothy Quick, is contributing TURN OVER, a grimly humorous story of an old man who means what he says when he threatens his family that he will turn in his grave.

The September issue with other headliners will be on sale at your newsstand on July 1st.

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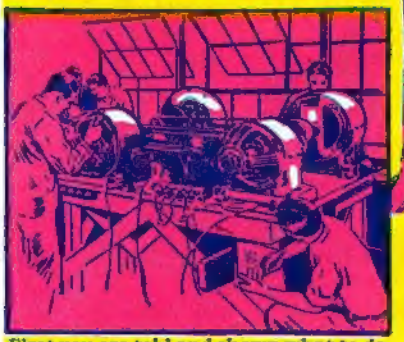

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